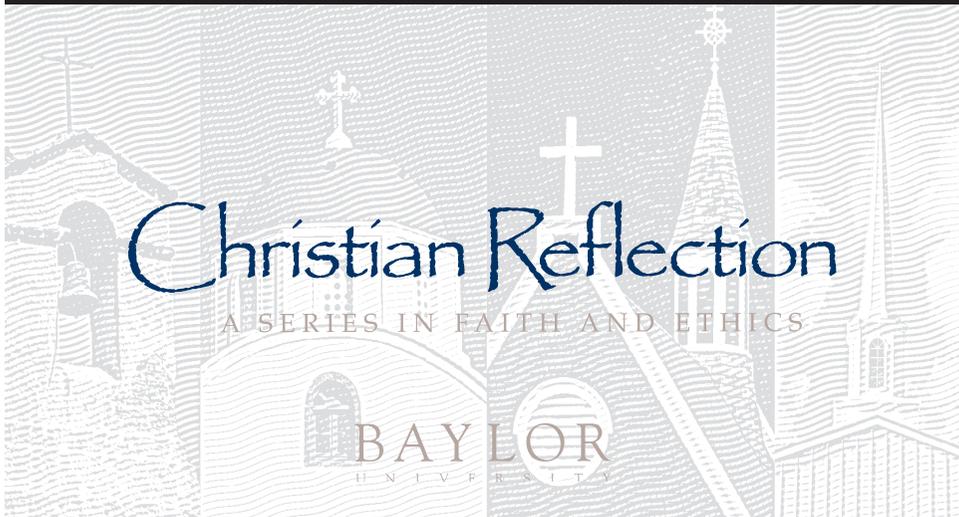


Apocalyptic Vision

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

BAYLOR
UNIVERSITY



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ISSN 1535-8585

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Christian Reflection is published quarterly by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Contributors express their considered opinions in a responsible manner. The views expressed are not official views of The Center for Christian Ethics or of Baylor University.

The Center expresses its thanks to individuals, churches, and organizations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, who provided financial support for this publication.

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THE CHURCH AS A COMPANY OF NOMADS

The early Christians, steeped in the apocalyptic imagination of post-exilic Judaism, saw themselves as a company of nomads in the present age. A Church that can celebrate this vision through worship and service is truly a people who have heard “what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

THE WHOLE CREATION HAS BEEN GROANING

In apocalyptic language, the Apostle Paul describes the corruption of nature and expresses the cosmic scope of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. If God plans to redeem the damaged material creation at the end of the age, God’s redeemed children should care for nature now. God’s plan for what we will be in the future in glory is the moral pattern for how we should live today.

SATAN AND THE POWERS

In apocalyptic writings we meet a cast of fallen characters—Satan, demons, and other nefarious beings—that indicate spiritual realities, earthly office-holders, or structures of power. How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by such powers? And where is God in the mix?

IS APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION KILLING US?

Much religious violence draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration. Dangerous misinterpretations of the apocalyptic paradigm of cosmic warfare are often linked with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious in nature.

ISLAM IN APOCALYPTIC PERSPECTIVE

The history of American apocalyptic thought offers much reason for discouragement. Christians have been too eager to gloss biblical prophecy with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam’s demise.

AN AUTHORIZED LOOK INTO THE LIFE BEYOND

What John sees—“a new heaven and a new earth”—is not a replaced, but a redeemed heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and the obstacles to intimacy are removed. Intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it involves community relationships with all those who love and serve God.

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

How should the Christian apocalyptic imagination—a way of construing God’s redemptive actions through the arresting visions and hyperbolic language of biblical apocalyptic writings—shape our discipleship?

The Church today “has to make itself distinct and to be a community which hears the Apocalypse [the Book of Revelation],” Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) presciently warned. “It has to testify to its alien nature and to resist the false principle of inner-worldliness.” Yet, we often have failed to heed his advice. Instead, we have isolated the apocalyptic themes that are integral to the New Testament, treating their strange visions and hyperbolic language as an unnecessary distraction from the gospel, or worse as a dangerously immoral competitor. Our contributors help us to understand the Christian apocalyptic imagination—a way of construing God’s redemptive actions through the arresting words and images of biblical apocalyptic writings—and how it should shape our discipleship.

In *The Church as a Company of Nomads* (p. 11), Barry Harvey notes that early Christians, steeped in the apocalyptic imagination of post-exilic Judaism, saw themselves as a community of pilgrims in this world. “The Church that can learn to celebrate this vision of the world to come in worship week after week, and then move into the world to serve as a concrete sign of that reality in the present social order,” he writes, “is truly a people who find in Christ the center in which all things hold together, in the Spirit the true communion of human flourishing, and in God’s reign the just rule for all creation.”

To counter “a popular misperception that apocalypses are world-denying and pessimistic about nature,” Harry Hahne points to the Apostle Paul’s use of apocalyptic imagery to decry the corruption of nature and express the cosmic scope of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. “If God plans to redeem the damaged material creation at the end of the age,” Hahne

concludes in *The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning* (p. 19), "God's redeemed children ought to show a strong concern for the care of nature."

In apocalyptic writings we encounter a scary cast of fallen characters—Satan, demons, and other nefarious beings—that indicate spiritual realities, earthly officeholders, or structures of power. "Because we live our lives in the social and cultural matrices constituted by the principalities and powers, we readily absorb and reflect their values and expectations, including their sinful and corrupting tendencies," Susan Garrett warns in *Satan and the Powers* (p. 29). How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by such powers? And where is God in the mix?

When handled with care, apocalyptic theology has much to offer us. "It can help to demythologize our own institutions and deflate human pretensions and arrogance. As a theology of hope it counsels patient endurance and encourages us lest we be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the evil, injustice, and suffering in the world," Scott Lewis, S.J., notes in *Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?* (p. 37). Yet, we must admit that much religious violence draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration. "The element of apocalyptic theology that is most dangerous and subject to misinterpretation is the paradigm of cosmic warfare," Lewis suggests, especially when it is "linked with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious in nature."

In *Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective* (p. 46), Thomas Kidd reviews how American Christians have glossed biblical apocalypses with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam's demise. Yet "essential religious differences give no one, Muslim or Christian, the right to harm, insult, or demonize the other," he counsels. "Anger over jihadist terror does not license the invention of extra-biblical forecasts of apocalyptic destruction."

In *Apocalyptic Visions in Black and White* (p. 68), Heidi Hornik discusses Albrecht Dürer's famous woodcut series *The Apocalypse*. These images, including *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (on the cover), powerfully influenced later depictions of the Book of Revelation. In *Terrible Judgment* (p. 64), she explores Gislebertus' sculpture *The Last Judgment* which welcomed leprous pilgrims to the twelfth-century cathedral of St. Lazare in Autun, France. "Humankind's pitiful weakness and littleness are distilled in terror-stricken, weeping, doll-like forms," she notes, while "angels and devils fight at the scales where souls are being weighed."

Terry York's new hymn, "A Searing, Blazing Hope" (p. 60), with music by David Bolin, interprets several themes in this issue. About the apocalyptic perspective, York writes, "before earth's kings it boldly stands, / but bows before Christ's name." He continues a line of thought that Hahne has introduced: "All nature stretches toward the hope / within the gospel of our Christ; / all wildlife, water, earth, and air / Redeemer's love can claim."

The worship service (p. 54) by John Woods calls us to celebrate John the Revelator's vision of "a new heaven and a new earth" as the cosmic goal of

God's redemptive plan. In *The End of It All* (p. 73), Brett Younger reflects on the vision in Revelation 19. "The rider on the white horse and the party in heaven depicted in Revelation 19 seem far away most days," Younger writes, "but what we believe about the future affects how we live. Believing that the end belongs to God breaks the power of the world, and fills us with hope that continues even in sorrow." Harold Bryson interprets the culminating vision of Revelation 21 in *An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond* (p. 78): "John is not witnessing a replaced, but a redeemed heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because all of the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and all of the obstacles to intimacy are removed." Such intimacy with God, he observes, "involves community relationships with all those who love and serve God."

"Biblical apocalyptic texts are not simply about the past, nor simply about the future; they are about both the past and the present, and receive their ultimate fulfillment in the future as they are multiply realized through time," writes Jonathan Sands Wise in *Leaving "Left Behind" Behind* (p. 82). He reviews three recent books — *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology*, edited by Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung; Barbara R. Rossing's *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*; and Stephen L. Cook's *The Apocalyptic Literature* — that articulate a biblical view of the end times, while resisting the excesses of dispensational premillennialism. The biblical apocalyptic visions, Stephen Cook says, "make sense of life and help compose and orient readers, but their impetus is outward, toward witness and involvement."

In *Death, Resurrection, and New Creation* (p. 88), Dan Epp-Tiessen surveys three books that stress the importance of eschatology — the study of biblical teachings on the end of time, the return of Christ, and the working out of God's ultimate purpose for creation — for Christian discipleship. N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* challenges popular misconceptions about heaven, the soul, and eternal life by insisting that "God's resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proper starting point for all thinking about life after death." Donald G. Bloesch's *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* and Jürgen Moltmann's *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* develop more systematic accounts of the last things. A common and central thread running through all three works, Epp-Tiessen concludes, is this: "Resurrection is body- and earth-affirming because the actions we engage in now to build for God's kingdom will be taken into and fulfilled in God's new heaven and earth in ways that we cannot yet imagine."✠

The Church as a Company of Nomads

BY BARRY HARVEY

Early Christians, steeped in the apocalyptic imagination of post-exilic Judaism, saw themselves as a company of nomads in the present age. A Church that celebrates this vision through worship and service is truly a people who have heard “what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Looking back over the centuries, we can notice many times and places in which people have imagined the world as a house in which they are comfortably at home. When this is the case, the moral task for individuals is to find their proper place in that world and to act in accordance with its foundational practices and institutions. Be it in ancient Athens, the first-century Roman Empire, a medieval kingdom, or a twenty-first century capitalist society, for such people who see themselves living in a comfortable world, the way the world *is* seems to be just the way the world *should be*. Continuity and stability are the guiding principles of such a society.

Yet at other times and places, people have seen themselves as living in an open field, often without owning the pegs with which to pitch a tent.¹ That is how the first Christians imagined the world and their place in it. They saw themselves as citizens belonging to another commonwealth, a company of nomads garnered “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9) to populate a city making its way through history on pilgrimage to the city of God. They traced this way of seeing their lives back to Abraham, who “obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states that Abraham and his sons lived in tents, as though the land of promise to which they had been directed was a foreign land. We are told

that they looked forward “to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (11:10). In the conclusion of the letter the author reiterates this stance, stating that Jesus’ followers have no lasting city here, but are looking instead “for the city that is to come” (13:14).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly describes how God’s pilgrim people view their existence in the world: “Here on earth, the church-community lives in a foreign land. It is a colony of strangers far away from home, a community of foreigners enjoying the hospitality of the host country in which they live, obeying its laws, and honoring its authorities. With gratitude it makes use of what is needed to sustain the body and other areas of earthly life.” This community of pilgrims participates in the life of the host country, prays for those in authority over it, and offers the best service they can, but in the end “it is merely passing through.” At any given moment it might hear the call to move on, and then “it will break camp, leaving behind all worldly friends and relatives, and following only the voice of the one who has called it.”²



This way of seeing the world is rooted in the apocalyptic imagination that first developed in post-exilic Judaism. “Apocalyptic” is derived from the Greek *apokalypsis*, which is usually translated “revelation” or “unveiling.” This translation is accurate as far as it goes, but the disclosure is not primarily information regarding a previously hidden state of affairs or a prediction about the end of the world. What is being unveiled has to do instead with God taking decisive and timely action to bring about the divine intention for creation. In the words of Jesus, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come” (Mark 1:15a).

Apocalypticism first appeared on the scene as the Jewish people struggled to make sense of what had happened to them following their expulsion from the Promised Land in the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of the eighth to sixth centuries B.C. The covenants that God had made with them seemed remote, their promises largely unfulfilled. And yet as a people they continued to believe that God’s redemptive work had not been arrested by their hardheartedness. When in the past they cried out in repentance, God had heard their cry and acted on their behalf. Manna was provided in the wilderness; judges were raised up to deliver the people from their enemies; a man after God’s own heart was anointed as king; Jerusalem was graciously spared when threatened with seemingly overwhelming force. With each provisional fulfillment the original promise was elaborated or augmented, often in surprising and yet consistent ways. Each partial resolution created an expectation and hope for something more, thus expanding the content and range of the original promise.

The return of some exiles to the land of Israel in the centuries that followed (though once there they remained under the dominion of foreign rulers) was seen by some Jews as a partial fulfillment of the ingathering

promised by the prophets. But it was evident that a complete return had not occurred, and that their dispersion among the nations continued. In response to these circumstances a group of apocalyptic visionaries began to proclaim that the God of their ancestors had actually begun “a new thing” in their midst (Isaiah 43:19) which eluded human planning and calculation, and would culminate in the rescue and restoration of Israel and the consummation of God’s blessing to all nations as well. A new covenant with the chosen people was in the works, though one that would not be like the covenant that God had made with their ancestors when he had taken them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, “a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 31:32).

According to these visionaries, the present order of the world could not contain what God had in store for Israel and for the rest of creation. To make sense of the changes that would result from God’s decisive act, they saw the time of creation divided into two ages. There was the exile of the present age (*ha-’olam hazeh*), when the wicked flourish and God’s people suffer the rule of idolatrous powers that claim for themselves what belongs to God alone, and the age to come (*ha-’olam haba’*), when all creatures would witness the restoration of God’s sovereignty, the defeat of sin and death, and the vindication of Israel and the righteous Gentiles (see, for example, Isaiah 24:4–5, 21–2; 25:6–8; and 65:17; Zechariah 1:7–21; 2:11; 4:1–4, 10b–14; and 6:1–8; and Daniel 7:1–28 and 12:1–13).

Extraordinary phenomena – cataclysmic upheavals such as earthquakes and floods, and visions of the heavenly throne room – appear in apocalyptic texts as portents of this momentous transposition, for only such imagery does justice to what will take place. Modern readers should take care, therefore, not to be put off by such images, nor to be distracted by the timetables endlessly concoct-

ed by certain preachers and fiction writers that purport to predict when and how the world will come to an end. The purpose of apocalyptic language is not to “picture” the world, but to position the church-community in right relation to the things, people, events, and institutions that presently constitute it, a relation determined by the course history will take and the consummation that awaits all creation in the messianic kingdom.

Far from predicting the imminent destruction of time and space, (that is, of “history” itself), apocalyptic imagination both preserves and intensifies the sense of expectation, delay, tension, and eventual resolution that per-

Apocalypticism first appeared on the scene as the Jewish people struggled to make sense of what had happened to them following their expulsion from the Promised Land.

vades Israel's attentive following of history. The biblical writers hold in generative tension the motifs of the nearness *and* the deferment of God's reign and regime—that is, the “is” and “is not” of apocalyptic thought. We thus find throughout these writings a pronounced sense of exigency and longing for the day of the Lord compounded by exhortations to patience that tacitly acknowledge that God does delay.



It is from this communal and historical soil that Jesus of Nazareth emerged, proclaiming to his fellow Israelites that the kingdom was drawing near, and thus they needed to “repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). Through his life, death, and resurrection, God's messianic reign became a present reality in connection with the day-to-day concerns and celebrations of life. Over against the forces and powers that had governed the course and content of life in the ancient world virtually uncontested, Jesus introduced an alternative pattern of communal life, a distinctive set of personal habits and relations, and a different story in terms of which to make sense of all things on earth and under heaven. The meaning of all other figures, events, and institutions no longer resided in themselves. They were now derivative signs, the significance of which could only be followed in their relationship to this one Jewish man and the body politic of the Church, over which he rules as head.

The New Testament witness to the unveiling of God's messianic kingdom in and through Christ is by no means uniform, as evidenced by its literary and theological diversity, but the distinctive motifs of apocalyptic thought nonetheless figure prominently in virtually every book. Owing to what God accomplishes in Christ, Scripture testifies to the fact that the world had crossed a decisive threshold with the triumph of God over death and sin. At the same time, however, creation still awaits the final transfiguration of heaven and earth. The necessities of eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, having children, burying parents, acquiring and disposing of property, producing and exchanging goods, continue as before. The biblical writers thus locate the time of the Church at the juncture where the two ages and two social orders overlap. There is the present age over which the authorities and powers exercise dominion, but which will ultimately pass away, and the age of God's everlasting reign, when all creatures will witness God's triumph over sin and death, and the vindication of the righteous in Israel and among the nations.

Apocalyptic texts make effective use of the literary device of foreshortening to depict the coming of God's everlasting rule in connection with events in history. Foreshortening compresses the time between what is near at hand and the last things, putting them into immediate juxtaposition. The author of Daniel, for example, writing sometime in the middle of the second

century B.C. during the Maccabean revolt, adopts the sixth-century perspective of the character of Daniel to describe events that had already occurred (the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rise of Hellenistic kingdoms in the Middle East, culminating with the rule of the tyrant Antiochus IV) in connection with God's immanent judgment on these kingdoms (the "present" of Daniel's readers) and the establishment of the everlasting kingdom of the Son of Man (the eschatological backdrop against which all these events are depicted).

Through skillful use of foreshortening, the things that had already occurred, the things that would occur shortly, and the things that will be revealed at the end of the age are blended together with the "present" of the author. There is no intention to deceive readers by surreptitiously claiming an after-the-fact authority of a past hero of Israel. Rather, the goal is to fashion an new awareness to (1) the memory of Daniel and his friends struggling to survive in Babylon during the Exile, providing the narrative standpoint for the passage, (2) a depiction of how everything on earth and under heaven would eventually end up with the coming of the Son of Man whose reign would be everlasting, and (3) how both of these impinged upon the times and tasks of the Jews during the Maccabean revolt (the "present" of the book's intended readers).³

The same procedure is used in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, the so-called "Little Apocalypse." In this extended discourse (which is rare in Mark), Jesus warns about the impending destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. When questioned about the timing of these events by his inner circle of disciples, Jesus gives what appears to be a confusing answer. He begins by stating that a time of persecution is coming for his followers leading up to the consummation of this age, as they will be brought before governors, kings, and synagogues to testify about him. Jesus then ties these tribulations to allusions about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, which will bring with it terrible suffering, and give rise to false messiahs and prophets (13:5-23). He speaks in explicitly apocalyptic terms about the sun being darkened and the stars falling from the heavens, which are harbingers of the final coming of the Son of Man in clouds of glory (an image drawn from Daniel 7) to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth (13:24-27).

Apocalyptic authors skillfully use the literary device of foreshortening to blend together things that had already occurred, things that would occur shortly, and things that will be revealed at the end of the age.

Finally, he counsels his disciples to learn the lesson of the fig tree, and recognize from the signs that “all these things” will occur within this generation, but that no one but the Father knows the day or hour these things will occur. Jesus concludes with a short parable summoning his disciples to stay awake, to remain alert (13:28-37).

If the author of Mark wrote these verses sometime between 60 and 70 (or even later), then it would seem that Jesus was mistaken about the timing of these events, if not completely incoherent. The end of the age had not occurred during the generation of Jesus’ listeners, and the fall of Jerusalem had either already taken place or was imminent. And yet the evangelist sets these words down with no apparent discomfort. Mark had skillfully adopted the standpoint of the pre-Easter disciples for his narrative. All the events depicted in this chapter, “the spread of the gospel, the suffering of the missionaries, the destruction of Jerusalem, the coming of false Messiahs, and the apocalyptic last coming of the Son of man were from the time standpoint of the first disciples future events.” Through the technique of foreshortening Mark has fashioned an attentive awareness to “(1) what Jesus had once said and done (the ‘present’ of Mark’s narrative), (2) how everything would end up (the long future), and (3) how both of these impinged upon the ‘present’ needs and tasks of the Marcan church (the ‘present’ of Mark’s readers).”⁴

Jesus and his followers thus marked the beginning of the recapitulation of all things, setting before a rebellious cosmos the decisive sign in terms of which all other relationships and exchanges that comprise humankind’s common life were to be parsed. As a consequence of this one Jewish man’s life, the prevailing order of time and space was turned upside down in classic apocalyptic fashion. For those with eyes trained to see and ears to hear what was happening in their midst, the times between the present age and the age to come had contracted and the last things (*eschata*) were near at hand, pressing upon the ways and means of this world. The people, places, and things of this age were immediately confronted with God’s critical, decisive, and final action for all of creation, an action that continues through the life, worship, and witness of the Church.



Steeped in this way of looking at the world and of living in it, the early Christians thus regarded earthly kingdoms and empires with a wary eye because, though they served an important function within the fallen order of creation, they invariably laid claim to an authority that belonged to God alone. By its very existence, then, the Church called into question the dominant political and moral categories of the Roman world. Christians, like everyone else, married and had children, but did not expose their young. They showed hospitality to those in need, but protected the sanctity of marriage. They prayed for the welfare of the emperor, but refused to take up the

gladius ultor, the avenging sword. In short, writes the anonymous author of a second-century letter to someone named Diognetus, "Their lot is cast 'in the flesh', but they do not live 'after to the flesh'."⁵

Needless to say, it took considerable conviction to identify oneself with such a group. Conversion was not seen as a private matter between God and the individual, but a social act with profound political repercussions. Add the intermittent threat of persecution to the more mundane problems that invariably come with minority immigrant status, and we can conclude that cheap grace was not a widespread problem among the faithful.

The New Testament's apocalyptic imagination was preserved to varying degrees well into the early centuries of the Church. The Shepherd of Hermas reminded Christians in the early second century that "you servants of God live in a foreign country, for your city is far from this city" (50:1). But as the centuries wore on, the apocalyptic compression of time that captivated the imagination of the early church gradually faded into the background, and the vivid sense of expectation generated by this view of things was relaxed. History "re-expanded" and the *eschata* were projected further and further into the future "and thus into insignificance."⁶ The keen awareness of living in the tension between the "is" and the "is not" gradually faded, and the demarcation between Church and world grew more and more opaque.

When the Church sees itself essentially at home in the world as it is, it becomes easier to assume that Christians share essentially the same set of moral ends and virtues with most everyone else. The moral expectations of the Church for its own members must then be consistent with what is required of those who maintain society's principles and directives: the ruler, the diplomat, the investment banker, the soldier, the chairman of the board, the social worker, the factory manager. Ethical obligations are aligned with what is needed to maintain the given order of things, not by what is entailed in the apocalyptic intrusion of God into that order. Over the centuries the outlines of the body of Christ become less and distinct, and the day-to-day existence becomes co-extensive with and thus indistinguishable from that of any other citizen.

The identification of an earthly social order with the will of God is part of an unfortunate yet consistent pattern in the history of Christian thought. Beginning with Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century praising the emperor Constantine as a kind of messianic figure, Christians have abandoned their tents and built houses. What would it look like for modern day disciples to regain a view of the world steeped in an apocalyptic imagination? We do not have to look too far to see one exemplar. In his book *Last Things First*, Gayraud Wilmore describes how the form of worship that developed in African-American churches held in creative tension this world and the next, allowing the vision of the age to come stand in judgment over the present order of things.

The result was a new eschatological perspective in America. It arose in the sanctuary as the ecstasy of a vision of paradise at one moment, and in the next it drove believers into the streets to give that vision material actuality in the structures of society. In the worship experience of the black congregation Jesus Christ came every Sunday as the guarantor of a new reality 'for all God's children' – bringing to naught the things that are and bringing into existence the things that do not yet exist (1 Corinthians 1:28).⁷

The Church that can learn to celebrate this vision of the world to come in worship week after week, and then move into the world to serve as a concrete sign of that reality in the present social order, is truly a people who find in Christ the center in which all things hold together, in the Spirit the true communion of human flourishing, and in God's reign the just rule for all creation. It is a Church that has heard "what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Revelation 2:7).

NOTES

1 Martin Buber draws this distinction between those who see the world as a comfortable home and those who see it as a field through which they journey. See "What is Man?" in *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 150–152.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 4, translated by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 250–251.

3 James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, volume 2, *Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 94.

4 Ibid.

5 *The Epistle to Diognetus*, V.4–8, translated by Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, volume 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

6 McClendon, *Doctrine*, 90.

7 Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Last Things First* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982), 88.



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The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning

BY HARRY ALAN HAHNE

In mysterious apocalyptic language, the Apostle Paul describes the corruption of nature and expresses the cosmic scope of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. What does it mean for us to participate now in God’s redemptive activity that extends to the natural world?

One of the most profound New Testament expressions of God’s plan for the natural world is in Romans 8:19-23. It powerfully depicts the apocalyptic expectation that at the end of history God will reverse the damage from the Fall not only to humanity, but even to nature itself.

There is a popular misperception that apocalypses are world-denying and pessimistic about nature. For the average person, the word “apocalypse” brings to mind the end of the world. It is true that most early Jewish and Christian apocalypses have a dualistic or two age view of history. Apocalypses view the present age or world as corrupted by sin and in sharp contrast with the future perfect world or age of glory and righteousness.¹ Nevertheless, unlike Gnostic writings, biblical apocalypses – such as Daniel, Isaiah 24-27, 65-66, and Revelation – and most early Jewish apocalypses view the present material world as damaged by sin, but not fallen or inherently evil. Furthermore, they look forward not to the eventual destruction of the material world, but to its eschatological perfection and liberation from the damage caused by sin.

From roughly 200 B.C. to 100 A.D., many Jewish writers used apocalypses to express their struggle with the problem of evil and the expectation that

God would dramatically intervene to make things right at the end of history. They often express an ecological concern for nature by stressing that the natural world was created by God and is under God's control. The sins of humans and fallen angels have defiled the earth and caused some aspects of nature not to operate as God originally intended. God holds humans and fallen angels accountable for their sins against the earth and animals. Nature is a victim of human and angelic sin and cries out in suffering, and in the coming new age, the natural world will be redeemed and transformed to a state of great glory.²

In Romans 8:19-23 the Apostle Paul reflects an apocalyptic perspective similar to this stream of Jewish apocalypses. He looks forward to the permanent eschatological transformation of creation when Christ returns. The damage that the Fall caused to nature will be reversed and nature will be perfected, so that it shares in the glory of the resurrected children of God. Although this passage is part of a letter rather than an apocalypse (like the book of Revelation), nevertheless the worldview, the theology, and many expressions are very similar to those in Jewish apocalypses from the same period.³ It is one of the clearest expressions of what J. C. Beker calls Paul's expectation of "the apocalyptic triumph of God." This apocalyptic perspective emphasizes "the hope in the dawning victory of God and the imminent redemption of the created order, which he has inaugurated in Christ."⁴

PAUL'S APOCALYPTIC VIEW OF NATURE

Paul develops two major themes: the present corruption of nature is a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve, and the eschatological redemption of nature will free it from corruption and transform it to freedom and glory. These themes are common in Jewish apocalypses from the same period. John Collins notes that "the underlying problem of all the apocalypses [is that] this world is out of joint, one must look beyond it for a solution." He also observes that most Jewish apocalypses have an eschatological hope that God will intervene to remove evil and radically transform the whole cosmos into a perfect new world.⁵

The pivotal interpretive question in Romans 8:19-23 is the meaning of the Greek word translated "creation" (*ktisis*).⁶ Although in some contexts this word can refer to all that is created or an individual creature, in this passage it more narrowly means nature. Even though verse 22 refers to "the whole creation," several aspects of the created order are incompatible with what Paul says about creation in this passage: *angels* have not been subjected to futility or decay due to their sin or human sin (vv. 20-21), *demons* will not be redeemed (v. 21) and they do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God when Christ returns (v. 19), *heaven* has not been subjected to futility or decay (vv. 20-21), and *unbelievers* do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God (v. 19), nor will all be delivered from the consequences of sin (v. 21). Some interpreters suggest that Christians are in view,

since verses 17-18 mention the suffering and glory of Christians. However, even though *ktisis* occasionally refers to believers (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15), Paul distinguishes believers from “the creation” in this passage: “Not only the creation, but we ourselves [i.e. believers]...groan inwardly” (v. 23). When angels, demons, heaven, unbelievers, and Christians are excluded from the meaning of *ktisis*, the part of creation that remains is the subhuman material creation or nature.⁷

Paul vividly depicts the present suffering of nature due to the Fall. “The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it” (v. 20). As a result, creation is in “bondage to decay” (v. 20) and “has been groaning in labor pains until now” (v. 22). Although the natural world is not itself fallen or disobedient to God, Adam’s sin brought the created order into bondage to death, decay, corruption, and futility (vv. 20-21). The background for this passage is Genesis 3:17-19, which describes the curse on the ground due to the original human sin.⁸ When God pronounced the curse after the Fall, God subjected creation to futility and simultaneously gave hope of its eventual redemption through a descendant of Eve (v. 20, “in hope”; cf. Genesis 3:15). The Greek word translated “was subjected” (*hupotassō*) suggests an authoritative action, in this case the curse that God pronounced after Adam fell.⁹ Whereas in Romans 5:12-19, Paul says that Adam’s Fall brought sin and death to humanity, in Romans 8:20-22 he extends the impact of the Fall to the natural world. Thus, nature is not now in the condition it originally was when it was created.

The reason Adam’s sin affected nature is that God gave humanity dominion over nature (Genesis 1:26-28). Since Adam was accountable to God to rule the earth and to tend the garden as a vice-regent under God, his sin affected the natural world for which he was responsible.¹⁰ Thus, nature became frustrated in its purposes and can no longer be all it was created to be.

Yet Paul describes this suffering of the natural

world in the context of great eschatological hope for both believers and nature: “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (v. 22). The suffering of creation is like birth pangs leading to a glorious new world, rather than the death pangs of a dying creation. Throughout Scripture the metaphor of birth pangs points to an intense and prolonged pain that leads to a joyous and positive outcome. This bipolar metaphor

The suffering of creation is like birth pangs leading to a glorious new world, rather than the death pangs of a dying creation. The intense pain leads to a joyous outcome.

combines extended, intense pain with a better state of affairs in the future. Creation eagerly awaits “the revealing of the children of God” (v. 19), because at that time the natural world will be “set free from its slavery to corruption” (v. 21, NASB)¹¹ and will be transformed to share in “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21).

Thus, the redemption that Christ brings will have cosmic consequences. At the Second Coming of Christ when God’s people are resurrected and glorified (vv. 19, 23; cf. 29-30), the natural order will be restored to its proper operation, so that it fulfills the purpose for which it was created. This passage strongly suggests that God will transform the existing creation, rather than create a brand new world from scratch. When Paul says “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” (v. 21), the phrase “the creation itself” could be translated more literally as “this creation.” The resurrection of the bodies of believers is part of this perfection of nature, for which both the material creation and believers “wait eagerly” (vv. 19, 23; cf. Philippians 3:21).¹² Paul’s vision for redemption has a cosmic scope and is not limited merely to the salvation of individual humans or even to the Church as the new community of redeemed humanity.

Romans 8:19-22 personifies nature in order to more vividly describe the impact of sin on nature and the future redemption of creation. The Old Testament and Jewish apocalypses also frequently describe various aspects of nature with emotions, intellect, and will.¹³ For example, the apocalypse in Isaiah 24-27 similarly personifies the suffering of nature due to human sin. “The earth mourns and withers, the world fades and withers.... The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24:4-5, NASB). Just as Isaiah poetically describes how the land suffered when Israel broke the old covenant, Paul uses personification to graphically depict how human sin causes nature to suffer. Even though the descriptions of nature are figurative in Romans 8:19-22, its suffering due to human sin should not be minimized. The present suffering of creation is very real and God will bring this suffering to an end when Christ returns.

PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S PLAN FOR NATURE

The concepts in Romans 8:19-23 have profound implications for ecological ethics and a Christian worldview concerning nature. Although the Apostle Paul does not work out all of these implications, they are the logical fruit of adopting the view of nature in this passage. Let me suggest some ways that we can apply these implications to our lives and participate in God’s plan for nature.

Scripture says that disciples of the Lord Jesus have the mind of Christ through God’s indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:16) and ought to be growing more like their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:45). Therefore, they ought to love the things that God loves. When God created the earth, plants,

animals, and other aspects of the material creation, God declared them “good.” Although the Fall of humanity damaged creation so it does not function completely as originally designed, God did not thereafter declare nature or material things to be evil. Romans 8:20 depicts nature as the victim of human sin. The creation was subjected to futility “not of its own will,” but due to the divine curse on the ground after Adam and Eve fell. This perspective is quite the opposite of the world-denying Gnostic view of nature that sees matter as inherently evil.

Passages such as 1 John 2:15-17 do not contradict Paul’s view of nature: “Do not love the world or the things in the world” for “the world and its desire are passing away.” In this context, “world” refers not to the material creation, but to the system of values and desires in opposition to God, such as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16, NASB).¹⁴ These sinful values and drives are not inherent in being material, but are due to the fallenness of humanity. The fact that matter is not inherently evil is shown by the fact that God became incarnate in physical flesh without defiling himself (1 John 4:2). Jesus was resurrected in a real, but glorified physical body (Luke 24:39; John 20:27), and one day believers will be resurrected in perfect material bodies (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:42).

Since God plans to redeem the damaged material creation (Romans 8:19, 21) and not simply dispose of it at the end of the age, God’s redeemed children ought to show a strong concern for the care of nature. Nature “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (v. 19), because when believers are glorified and freed from sin, they will assume their proper relationship to the rest of creation so that nature itself will share in that glory (v. 21). Even though God will instantly transform nature when Christ returns, that does not mean Christians should just wait for God to do the work when Christ returns. Sanctification

Paul’s vision for the redemption that Christ brings has a cosmic scope. It is not limited merely to the salvation of individual humans or even to the Church as the new community of redeemed humanity.

means that God gradually transforms believers so they begin acting now as they will act when they are glorified. Even though God will perfect the character of Christians when Jesus returns, they should begin living righteous lives now through God’s transforming power (Philippians 2:12). “When he [i.e. Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John

3:2b-3). God's plan for what believers will be in the future in glory is the moral pattern for how they ought to live in this world today.

The original task God gave the first humans was to care for creation. God gave humanity "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28b, cf. 26). Dominion over and care of nature is a major aspect of what it means that humans were created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-30). God delegated to Adam and Eve the task of tending the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). The two Hebrew verbs in this verse depict a balanced view of the human relationship with nature. First, Adam was to "till" (NRSV) or "cultivate" (NASB) the Garden of Eden. This suggests making changes, organizing and managing the natural world for the benefit of humanity, not simply keeping all of nature in its raw, wild state. This implies that it is legitimate to use nature for the good of humanity. But Adam was also to "keep" the garden. The Hebrew verb *shamar* means to "guard," "keep watch over," and "protect" like a watchman.¹⁵ This suggests that part of the human dominion over the earth is to make sure that the natural world does not suffer harm. At the least, this means that humans should not cause harm to nature. It also suggests a basis for maintaining at least some of nature in its wild form for its own sake, rather than using everything for human benefit. As a whole, the human race has done a pretty good job of fulfilling the first task of managing the earth for its own benefit. But humanity has done a much less effective job of protecting and caring for the earth, which was the second part of the creation care mandate. The human dominion over the earth does not provide an excuse for the abuse of the earth.¹⁶ Quite the contrary, humanity has been given a stewardship of the earth, which means God entrusted its care to the human race. Thus, God will hold people accountable for their interaction with and management of the natural world.

This has profound implications for the behavior of Christians as individuals, business leaders, and citizens of society. Negatively, this means that Christians should not act in ways that contribute to the decay of nature and increase its groaning. This includes avoiding such behaviors as polluting the air, water and earth, squandering limited natural resources, and abusing animals. It also suggests that there is a place for a society to have legislation to restrain the selfish actions of fallen human nature that result in environmental harm. Positively, it means that Christians should act in ways that anticipate the new creation. Far from avoiding involvement in the environmental movement, Christians should be leaders in it. Christians have even a stronger motivation and ideological foundation for an ecological ethic and active environmental care than people operating from secular or non-Judeo-Christian religious presuppositions. Christians should not care for the earth merely from enlightened self-interest that is only concerned for how it affects their quality of life and that of their children (an anthropocentric

approach to ecological ethics). Neither should they care for the earth because they see humans as merely a part of nature (the view of evolutionary science and many religions). Rather Christians should see their responsibility to care for the earth as a stewardship given by God, which obedience to the Lord Jesus demands (a theocentric approach).¹⁷

Paul's teachings in this passage also imply that human beings have solidarity with nature. Both believers and nature groan together as they long to be set free from the consequences of sin (Romans 8:22-23). This solidarity is an inescapable consequence of the dominion God gave humans over nature. Thus, when human beings sin, the natural world for which humans have responsibility is negatively impacted. When Adam and Eve fell, God cursed the ground, with the result that weeds now grow, the earth has less fecundity, and women experience pain in childbirth (Genesis 3:16-19). Although Romans 8:20 and Genesis 3 focus on the results of that first act of human sin, other human sins throughout history also harm nature. For example, habits of selfish and unbridled consumption directly and indirectly harm the environment and diminish the finite resources of the planet God entrusted to the care of humanity. Nature continues to groan because of the short sighted and selfish acts of the human race.

The solidarity of humanity with nature also stems from the fact that humans have material bodies (cf. Genesis 2:7a: "then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground"). People groan along with nature, because their physical bodies are in "bondage to decay" even as is the rest of the material creation (Romans 8:21, 23). This physical dimension is an essential part of what it means to be human. Humans are not only spiritual beings—they are embodied spirits. Thus, the redemption of Christians will not be complete until their physical bodies are redeemed, which will occur at Christ's return when they are resurrected in perfect, incorruptible, and glorious physical bodies (Roman 8:21, 23; Philippians 3:21; Revelation 20:5-6). The eternal destiny of God's redeemed people is to dwell in perfect resurrected

The solidarity of humanity with nature also stems from the fact that humans have material bodies. We are not only spiritual beings—we are embodied spirits.

bodies in a perfected earth, full of glory and freed from bondage to decay (Romans 8:21; Revelation 21-22), not as disembodied spirits floating about in some immaterial emptiness (2 Corinthians 5:1-4). If God so cares about human physical bodies that one day God will redeem and perfect them, then this suggests that Christians should glorify God by taking care of their bodies during this life. The human body is so sacred that it is a temple for

the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). "You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body," Paul concludes (1 Corinthians 6:20). This does not mean Christians should embrace the cult of the perfect body image so popular in Western society. But a person who does not care for his or her body dishonors the stewardship of the body entrusted by God and hence defiles God's temple. Stewardship of the body includes such actions as eating healthy foods, exercising (1 Corinthians 9:27), and avoiding sexual immorality, which harms both body and spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

Romans 8:19-23 suggests that the Western church needs to broaden its understanding of redemption in Christ. God's plan for redemption is not just for individual human souls or even the corporate redemption of a new community, although these are both essential aspects of redemption. The apocalyptic worldview stresses that God plans to restore the whole creation to its proper operation, which was lost when the first humans disobeyed God. "Through him [i.e. Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20). Since God's plan for redemption is cosmic, as believers grow more like Christ, their actions should have a positive impact not only on other people but also on the whole of God's creation. God's priority is on human redemption, but since humanity is God's agent in caring for nature, when humanity is restored to a right relationship with God, the rest of creation will also be restored to God's intended operation.

NOTES

1 A defining feature of apocalypses is a three-fold dualism – *cosmic* (heaven and earth), *temporal* (this age and the age to come), and *social* (sons of light and sons of darkness) – according to Wayne A. Meeks, "Social Functions of Apocalyptic Language in Pauline Christianity," in David Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, second edition (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1989), 687-705.

2 For a detailed discussion of the Jewish apocalyptic view of nature, see Harry Alan Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8.19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Library of New Testament Studies, no. 336 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 35-168.

3 Recent apocalyptic researchers distinguish between "apocalypse" as a literary genre and "apocalyptic eschatology" as a religious perspective. "When we use the term apocalyptic," James Barr writes, "we generally have in mind content and point of view rather than simply form: we think of a set of ideas and attitudes, which find typical expression in the apocalypse form more strictly so called but which are also found over a much wider range of literature." James Barr, "Jewish Apocalyptic in Recent Scholarly Study," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 58 (1975): 18.

4 J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), ix; cf. 363-366.

5 John J. Collins, "The Jewish Apocalypses," *Semeia* 14 (1979), 27-28. Jewish apocalypses frequently say that the sin of angels and humans, including the Fall of Adam, corrupted or defiled nature, resulting in cosmic aberrations (e.g. 1 Enoch 10:7-8; 4 Ezra 7:11-15; 9:19-20; Jubilees 4:28; 23:12-15; Apocalypse of Moses 11:3). They also expect God to reverse this

cosmic damage at the end of history and to transform the natural world into great glory (1 Enoch 45:4-5; 4 Ezra 8:53-54; 2 Baruch 29:1-8; 32:1-6). For hundreds of additional examples, see Hahne, *Corruption*, 35-168.

6 Depending on context, *ktisis* can mean: everything created by God (Colossians 1:15); an individual creature, either humans and animals (Romans 1:25), or any created thing (Romans 8:39; Hebrews 4:13); humankind collectively (Mark 16:15); humans transformed by God through the new birth, which is like a second creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); "the act of creation" (Romans 1:20); or, an authoritative institution or government (1 Peter 2:13).

7 Numerous commentators take this position, including Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, no. 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 506; Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1991), 551; and James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 38A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 469. For further evidence that *ktisis* here refers to nature, see Hahne, *Corruption*, 176-181.

8 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 330.

9 C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. and T. Clark, 1975), 413.

10 G. W. H. Lampe, "The New Testament Doctrine of *Ktisis*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964): 458.

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12 Philippians 3:21 suggests that the resurrection bodies of believers will be transformed, glorified, and perfected versions of their present bodies (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:42).

13 Examples include a cry of pain and sorrow due to sin (Genesis 4:11; Isaiah 24:4, 7; Jeremiah 4:28 and 12:4); suffering due to human sin (Genesis 3:17; Isaiah 24:4-7; 33:9; Jeremiah 4:4, 11, 26-28); joy (Psalms 65:12-13; 98:4, 7-9; Isaiah 14:7-8; 1 Enoch 7:6; 9:2; 87:1; 88:2; 4 Ezra 6:14-16; 7:55-56; 8:2-3; 10:9; 11:46; 12:43; Apocalypse of Moses 29:14), particularly when the righteous are in the messianic kingdom (Isaiah 55:12); fear about eschatological disasters (1 Enoch 1:6; 4 Ezra 6:14-16); consciousness, intellectual understanding (Isaiah 1:2); hope for eschatological deliverance (4 Ezra 11:46); and obedience to God (1 Enoch 5:2-3; 75:2; 101:6-7; 2 Baruch 21:4; 48:8-10, 46). See Hahne, *Corruption*, 165-168.

14 The meaning of the Greek word *kosmos* ("world") depends on the context. Common meanings include: humanity (John 3:16); people in opposition to God (John 16:20); all rational beings including angels (1 Corinthians 4:9); the system of sinful values hostile to God (1 John 2:15-17; 2 Peter 2:20); the material universe (John 17:5); and the earth (John 6:14).

15 William Lee Holladay, Ludwig Köhler, and Walter Baumgartner, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1971), 377.

16 This is how I would respond to Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-1207, who famously argues that the Western ecological crisis is a product of the Judeo-Christian tradition. While history shows many examples of Christians misinterpreting the human dominion over nature, this does not invalidate the biblical concept of dominion, when it is properly understood as a stewardship accountable to God. Just as the Fall corrupted relationships between people, it corrupted the human relationship with nature, resulting in acts of greed, self-centeredness, and shortsightedness toward nature. For more discussion of this point, see Russell A. Butkus, "The Stewardship of Creation," *The Moral Landscape of Creation*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 2 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian

Ethics at Baylor University, 2002), 17-23, and other articles in *The Moral Landscape of Creation* issue available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

17 For further discussion of the implications of understanding dominion as a stewardship entrusted to humanity by God, see Richard A. Young, *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994) and R. J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship Critical Perspectives – Past and Present* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2006).



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Satan and the Powers

BY SUSAN R. GARRETT

In apocalypses we meet a cast of fallen characters—Satan, demons, and other nefarious beings—that indicate spiritual realities, earthly officeholders, or structures of power. How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by such powers? And where is God in the mix?

The cast of characters in ancient apocalyptic writings typically includes beings that most of us do not encounter on a routine basis. These characters fall into clearly opposed groups. The chief protagonist is God. There are also (good) angels, who function as worshipers, escorts, interpreters, and agents of divine judgment. Depending on the apocalyptic work in question, the Son of Man or the Messiah may also play prominent roles as protagonists. On the other side, the antagonists in ancient apocalyptic writings typically include demons and fallen angels. In some texts, Satan is assumed to be chief of the fallen angels and the force behind other nefarious beings (such as the beast and false prophet in Revelation, and the lawless one in 2 Thessalonians 2). Sometimes, however, Satan goes unmentioned (as, for example, in Romans 5, where Paul refers instead to the governing worldly powers as “Sin” and “Death”).¹

The authors of ancient apocalyptic literature assume that actions of the unseen characters influence events among mortals and vice versa. In Luke’s Gospel, for example, Jesus remarks to those who arrest him, “But this is your hour, and the authority of darkness” (Luke 22:53, my translation). Jesus is implying that the actions of his human adversaries are controlled by none other than the Prince of Darkness. Or, to give another example, when Michael battles the dragon and casts him out of heaven (in Revelation 12), voices proclaim that the victory was achieved by the blood of Jesus and the testimony of the martyrs, and that Satan’s expulsion means still more

suffering for the followers of Jesus (Revelation 12:9-17). Unseen forces influence or even control what happens in the mundane realm, and what happens in the mundane realm reciprocally affects the unseen forces.

New Testament authors referred to these forces using a variety of terms, including “principalities,” “powers,” “authorities,” “rulers,” “kings,” “angels,” “demons,” “spirits,” “thrones,” and “dominions.” Reflecting the bi-directional working of these forces, authors applied the terms sometimes to *heavenly, spiritual realities* and sometimes to *earthly officeholders or structures of power*. Often, both were meant at once. For example, when Paul wrote that the “rulers of this world” had not understood God’s secret wisdom or else they would not have crucified Jesus (1 Corinthians 2:7-8), he was apparently referring *both* to the human “rulers of this world” who killed Jesus *and* to the spiritual forces that drove them.²

THE SYSTEMIC DIMENSION OF THE POWERS

Today, the convention among many evangelical Christians is to stress the invisible, spiritual side of the powers and downplay or ignore their worldly dimension. The powers, rulers, angels, and so on are understood to be spirit-beings, each with unique intelligence and supernatural abilities, and each committed to serving either Satan or God. According to this interpretation, Satan and his servants exercise astonishing, almost unlimited capacity to undermine God’s aims, and much of the world’s evil stems from their ongoing effort to do so.

Other Christians, especially those influenced by Calvinist and Reformed traditions, insist that the powers’ this-worldly dimension must always be kept in view. These interpreters take the New Testament’s language about “powers and principalities” to refer not (or not exclusively) to spirit-beings but (also) to *social entities*, and *norms for behavior*. In this view, the powers are not unequivocally evil; instead, their character and effects are mixed. Most were created with intention for good: think of the medical establishment, the institution of the family, a college honor code, or the Geneva conventions. But worldly powers—even those created for good—are prone to sin. They are intent on self-preservation, they may use questionable means to elicit loyalty, and they sometimes put selfish goals (such as profit or pleasure) ahead of the interests of God or fellow humans.³ Viewed in this way, the principalities and powers are part and parcel of the social and cultural systems and institutions that make human life in community possible. They are essential to human flourishing, even though fallen. This interpretation of the principalities and powers helps to make sense of a passage like Romans 13:1-7, where Paul regards the “authorities” and “rulers” as offices and officeholders divinely ordained for good.

Because we live our lives in the social and cultural matrices constituted by the principalities and powers, we readily absorb and reflect their values and expectations, including their sinful and corrupting tendencies. If I

discriminate against someone, it may be because my family, peers, and culture have blinded me to my own privilege and convinced me that certain classes of people deserve lesser treatment. Or, a “suicide bomber” may have been persuaded by the members of a militant group to see acts of violence as expressing loyalty to God and one’s people. Thus we see that humans sin because larger forces blind them, deceive them, subjugate them. We are accountable before God both as individuals, and as members of sinful communities whose biases and perversions we learn, act on, and pass on to others.

This systemic dimension of the powers, as well as their genuinely positive functions, are ignored in some recent popular portrayals, which interpret the principalities and powers exclusively as wicked spirit-beings. Consider, for example, the *Left Behind* novels, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. This set of twelve novels, which have sold over sixty-five million copies, depict events expected by many (but not all) Christians: the rapture of the saints, seven years of tribulation, and the Battle of Armageddon.⁴ Evil powers, in the world of *Left Behind*, come from outside humans, indeed from outside the world: the powers are supernatural forces that blind people as if by magic and indwell them by possession. The same could be said concerning the portrayal of the powers in the bestselling novels of Frank Peretti about the takeover of a small town by the forces of Satan, or concerning many other recent offerings on the topic of “spiritual warfare.”⁵ In these accounts, the powers are evil, and they are always something *outside*, something *other*. Even if they indwell us, they are in some fundamental way separate from us (and separate also from the social networks, ideologies, and institutions in which we participate).

Such a view promotes the dangerous assumption that, once we are saved, all is right with us. We can safely pass the buck because the evil has been expelled from *our* individual souls. We need not worry about evil

deriving from the social systems we support. Because LaHaye, Jenkins, Peretti, and others view evil powers as separable from people and institutions, they fail to see that the powers are embodied in *all* our institutions, including the church, and that humans are complicit in them. They fail to see how even churches are still prone to believe Sin’s twisted promises of well-being and to heed its words of flattery and enticement.

Because we live our lives in the social and cultural matrices constituted by the principalities and powers, we readily absorb and reflect their values and expectations, including their sinful and corrupting tendencies.

THE SIN AND REDEMPTION OF THE WORLD

How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by the powers? And where is God in the mix? The Apostle Paul traced our “present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) back to the time of Adam. When Adam sinned, a cosmic shift occurred: powers called “Sin” and “Death” entered into the world. God relinquished a measure of control over the world to these and to *all* the powers, which now determine the outcome of many earthly events. The powers, fallen as they are, exercise control because God lets them do so. But always God looks ahead to the Day of Resurrection, when the dead will be raised and Christ’s lordship over the powers—initiated at his resurrection—will be complete. Thus Christians’ “resurrection hope” is not simply that we as individuals will live again, but that *all of creation* “will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). On that day, the fallen powers will be fully subjugated, and God will truly “be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

This Pauline perspective on the powers has implications for how we view the problem of evil, suggesting that *God does not directly will each bad thing that happens*. At the creation God gave the powers genuine authority, and they determine the shape of many events, including many instances of evil. Sometimes the powers work against God, just as we as individuals sometimes work against God. God does not directly will those things to happen, though in divine sovereignty God does *allow* them to happen.

On the other hand, Paul writes, “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). This does not mean, as is often assumed, that “everything happens for a reason.” Rather, Paul is saying that God regularly turns even bad things to good ends. Thus, for example, in divine providence God permitted Joseph’s brothers to take him captive, but though they meant it for evil “God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20). To give another example, Paul was imprisoned by powers who meant to obstruct the purposes of God, but as a consequence of that imprisonment, brothers and sisters dared “to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear” (Philippians 1:14). Or, to offer the most important example of all, the rulers of this age orchestrated the crucifixion of Christ for evil purposes, not anticipating its salvific outcome (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Full and final redemption from the fallen powers will not come until the Last Day. The good news of the gospel is that at his resurrection Jesus Christ became “first fruits” of the coming redemption and Lord over the powers (1 Corinthians 15:23; Ephesians 1:20-21; 1 Peter 3:22). Moreover, he promised that Christians already share in this authority when they call upon Jesus’ name: “See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you” (Luke 10:19; cf. Ephesians 6:10-17; Philippians 2:10). But what does this “authority

to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” look like in practice?

Though Luke tells us that Jesus said “nothing will hurt you,” we know that the evangelist understood Jesus’ promise in a non-literal way, since in the rest of Luke and in Acts Christians are shown as suffering greatly for Jesus. Jesus’ lordship over the powers, and *our* authority as his disciples, is manifested not in supernatural protection of the saints as much as in the divine strength we are given to persevere in the midst of this fallen world. This is the same strength that enabled Jesus to endure (not escape) the crucifixion and so to undermine the powers as they sought to obstruct God’s reign. Jesus promises us real power — “power at work within us” by which God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

As Jesus contended against the principalities and powers in his ministry and in his passion, he showed himself as perfected, elevated, deified. Empowered by God, he accomplished far more than he ever could have done through human power alone. The good news for us is that, as Jesus’ disciples, we are united to Christ through the Spirit, who works in us to perfect and elevate us also. We, too, are enabled to accomplish far more than we ever could through human power alone. As Paul wrote, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

The Spirit of Christ enables us to grapple with the sinful and sorrowful conditions of human existence. Jesus strengthens us to resist the lure of the fallen powers, including the powers of sin and death, in ways that we never could alone.

Jesus heals our blindness.

He gives us eyes to see when the power of sin seduces us with its wily and deceptive promises. Sometimes such sight comes gradually. Sometimes it comes in an instant, with knee-buckling force, as understanding of our own elaborate duplicity and self-delusion overtakes us.

Sometimes, the healing affects only individuals; sometimes, whole peoples have the scales lifted from their eyes.

Jesus undergirds us when death buffets us and torments us. Throughout the ages, saints have faced down the powers that deal in death. They were, and are, able to conquer fear by trusting in the God who raises the dead. Few of us today have known martyrs, but most have seen Christians who

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witnessed to their faith by persevering in hope even in the midst of terrible affliction.

When we fail morally, Jesus forgives us. By accepting us, even running to meet and embrace us when we are dragged down with shame, he enables us to triumph over the forces that tempt us to despair. And *Jesus empowers us to love and serve ones whom we have wronged or hated*, to forgive ones who

Jesus heals our blindness, enabling us to see the powers for the created and fallen entities that they are. United to Christ through the Spirit, we are enabled to resist their corrupting influence.

have wronged us, and to call those wrongs to mind no more.

In all these ways, Christ frees us from the dominion of the powers and *shows that he is their Lord*. Though each could be elaborated, I will focus on the fourth sort of empowerment: Jesus' gift to us of divine strength to return good for evil and to

let love accede to the place where hatred once reigned.

One of the Satan-figure's many aliases in ancient Jewish and Christian writings is *Mastema*.⁶ The name means "enmity" or "hatred" – one of Satan's favorite tools. By means of hatred, Satan fosters blind obedience and even idolatrous worship – especially of those who claim the power to vanquish our enemies. Mastema delights in rousing our unrighteous anger. Anger can goad us to destroy the things, the people, the relationships that are most precious to us; anger can destroy even us. *But Jesus is stronger than Mastema*, for his power is that of love:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Matthew 5:43-48

How dare Jesus command us, and how dare we aspire, to "be perfect?" He dared, and we do, because the power to love our enemies does not issue from our own hearts – divided as they so often are, to protect our own interests and to justify our nurturing of grievances. The power to love our enemies comes from God, whose enemy we ourselves once were. Divine "perfection" is manifested in God's unconditional love for all. God freely

gives the sun and the rain—the very means of life—to the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Jesus, too, loves with such reckless abandon, and he commands us to do likewise, trusting that the power to do so comes from above (cf. James 1:17). When we harbor hate, we walk in darkness. *When we love, we have overcome the Evil One* (1 John 2:9-14).

The power that Jesus grants us to vanquish hate is not a consolation prize, given in the absence of the vaporizing, annihilating sort of power depicted in *Left Behind*. Anyone who has ever been possessed by the demon of hate—what Miroslav Volf defines as “revulsion for the other that feeds on the sense of harm or wrong suffered”⁷—knows how completely and ruthlessly it exercises its rule. Hatred takes control of our deeds, our words, our very minds until we lose all recognition that something is awry. Moreover, hatred has the power to control us not only as individuals but as whole populations. Hatred is so potent because it is the power of death itself (Matthew 5:21-22; 1 John 3:15). But Jesus rebukes hatred, saying, “Come out, you unclean spirit!” (cf. Mark 5:8). Jesus’ power to expel hatred and engender love is the most extraordinary power there is, for it is the power to overcome death with life.

CONCLUSION

Ancient apocalyptic writers used language about Satan and the powers to make sense of the relationship between events on earth and events in the heavenly or spiritual sphere. Christians today often interpret biblical language about the “principalities and powers” by understanding them either as entities wholly separable from humans (and, indeed, from this world) or incarnated in the earthly officeholders and structures of power that govern our day-to-day existence. In the latter view, many of the principalities and powers were created to serve good purposes, but all are prone to making sinful demands, especially the demand—exemplified by Satan in his tempting of Jesus in the wilderness—that humans regard them as ultimate and give homage to them instead of to God.

United to Christ through the Spirit, we are now freed from bondage to the powers, and enabled to resist their corrupting influence. Jesus heals our blindness, enabling us to see the powers for the created and fallen entities that they are. Yet, because the powers are coextensive with the social and cultural institutions that structure our daily lives, most of the world remains in thrall to them, and even we who are saved are constantly faced with temptations to submit to them again (Galatians 5:1; cf. Romans 6:12-16). That is why our resurrection hope is hope not only for individual life beyond death, but for divine deliverance of creation from the ruling idolatrous powers. Then, truly, God will be all in all.

NOTES

1 Satan is absent as well from important early Jewish apocalypses, including Daniel, 4 Ezra, and most portions of 1 Enoch. On the emergence of Satan as a character in apocalyptic literature, and for fuller elaboration of all the ideas presented in this article,

see Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 103-138. Portions of this article are adapted by the author from *No Ordinary Angel* and from Susan R. Garrett, "What Presbyterians Believe: The Problem of Evil," *Presbyterians Today* 95:2 (March 2005): 22-25. Passages from the latter are reprinted with permission from *Presbyterians Today*, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

2 Here I am dependent in part on the study of the New Testament's power-terms offered in Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984). Wink has been a prolific and important writer on the topic of the powers. Most noteworthy is his insistence that the powers always have both an exterior aspect (such as the structure and material assets of a corporation, or the machinery of government) and an interior aspect (such as the personality of a corporation or the ethos of an institution or epoch). For a critique of his approach, see Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, 129-130.

3 The insistence that most of the powers, though fallen, were created for good does not exclude recognition that some powers and principalities seek *only* to enhance their own position, consistently rejecting rules and standards meant to protect the rights of others, and devotedly serving a lesser god. One thinks, for example, of a cartel of drug traffickers, a gang that expects its members to act violently, the child pornography industry (where the "god" is money), or the Ku Klux Klan.

4 The twelve *Left Behind* novels, three prequels and a sequel for adults, and a kid's series, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, are published by Tyndale House.

5 Frank Peretti's most influential novels are *This Present Darkness* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1986) and *Piercing the Darkness* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989). For more on the spiritual warfare movement, see Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, 110-112. Thomas H. McAlpine, *Facing the Powers: What Are the Options?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003 [1991]) presents a useful survey of different interpretations of the powers.

6 "Mastema" is used in the pseudepigraphic book *Jubilees*.

7 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 77.



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Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?

BY SCOTT M. LEWIS, S.J.

Much religious violence draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration. Yet, when handled with care, apocalyptic theology has much to offer us. At its core it is about new creation, transformation, and change. It can demythologize our institutions and deflate human arrogance.

Charles Kimball's thoughtful and sober reflection illuminates the call of our time—the call to create a religious consciousness that is life-giving and contributes to building a world of peace and justice:

At the heart of all authentic, healthy, life-sustaining religions, one always finds this clear requirement. Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religions, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed. When religion becomes evil, these corruptions are always present. Conversely, when religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions, a process that is urgently needed now. Unlike generations that have gone before us, the consequences today of corrupted religion are both dire and global.¹

Unfortunately, the post-9/11 years have been marked by paranoia and fear and a collective hardening of hearts. At the same time there has been some healthy and honest self-criticism on the part of more thoughtful and sensitive representatives of all religions. They have sought the sources and causes of religious violence and have examined theological statements and the Scriptures themselves in an effort to understand why some people are convinced that God condones religious violence or even requires it. There

are no easy answers or panaceas for numerous factors contribute to hatred and violence. And no religion is innocent: there is a tendency to place all of the blame on Islamic extremists, but as Martin Marty notes, "I can say with confidence that the killing dimension of religion is an interfaith phenomenon."²

DANGEROUS FUEL FOR RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

An increasing number of studies have focused on apocalyptic theology as the fuel for much of history's religious violence. Apocalyptic is a particular theological mind set and symbolic world that can be found in all religions, both Christian and non-Christian, as well as in some secular revolutionary ideologies. Much of religious violence, regardless of the religious tradition in which it is found, draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration and symbolism.

The element of apocalyptic theology that is most dangerous and subject to misinterpretation and misuse is the myth or paradigm of cosmic warfare. This portrays the world as a vast battlefield on which a war of cosmic dimensions between good and evil is being waged and the committed believer as a divine warrior on the side of light and good. This cosmic dualism of good versus evil, light versus darkness, and truth versus falsehood etches a deep imprint on the religious imagination, and encourages the idealization of one's own group and demonization of the other. This is often reflected in rhetoric such as "evil empire," "Great Satan," and "axis of evil." Marty summarizes the problem well:

Believe in one all-powerful God. Believe that this God has enemies. Believe that you are charged to serve the purposes of God against these enemies. Believe that a unique and absolute holy book gives you directions, impulses, and motivations to prosecute war. You have, then, the formula for crusades, holy wars, jihads, and, as we relearned in the year just passing [2001], terrorism that knows no boundaries³

Apocalyptic warfare is often linked with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious in nature and is a response to the perception that the world has 'gone terribly awry' and that the situation is truly desperate. It is weapon of hope for extremists of all varieties, especially anti-abortion extremists, racial supremacists, as well as those haunted by various conspiracy theories such as the illuminati, UFO's, Jewish-Catholic-Freemason plots, irrational fears of the United Nations or the U.S. government, and so on.⁴ According to Mark Juergensmeyer, many view this cosmic warfare as their only hope:

The idea of warfare implies more than an attitude; ultimately it is a world view and an assertion of power. To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered.

The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and eschatology and offers the reins of political control. Perhaps most important, it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of cosmic war this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope itself.⁵

The following conditions are essential ingredients for the violent expression of the cosmic war myth. The first and probably principle condition is when the defense of one's basic identity and dignity — faith, race, culture, and so on — is believed to be at stake. This is often coupled with a sense of humiliation or powerlessness. When losing the struggle is seen as unthinkable and disastrous or when the situation is truly hopeless and unwinnable in human terms, violence is not far behind. The mythologized struggle enters the world and history in concrete form. It becomes sacralized, violence is legitimized, and it becomes a fight to the death between martyrs and demons. Lifted up above the bonds and limitations of ordinary society, the committed cosmic warrior feels empowered as an agent of God and as such is not accountable to the limitations of ordinary law and morality.⁶

The most pernicious danger of apocalyptic, especially in our own violent and polarized times, is what it is doing to our own consciousness. Apocalyptic in the intertestamental and Second Temple period (about 515 B.C. to 70 A.D.) rarely counseled direct violence on the part of believers — at least in the immediate

moment. Believers were to bide their time patiently, for vengeance belonged to God and would be dealt out appropriately on the day of divine intervention and judgment. But this also strengthened what Krister Stendahl called “the perfection of hatred” (after Psalm 139:22, “I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies”). One's

hatred was perfected by leading a normal and righteous life, avoiding violence, and even practicing kindness, but with a growing and eager anticipation of the approach of God's vengeance and the settling of accounts.⁷

At first glance this might seem benign — avoid violence and leave the punishment and retribution to God. There can develop, however, an eagerness for the anticipated violence that is disturbing and devoid of love. The

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almost gleeful relish with which the authors of the *Left Behind* series describe the destruction of thousands of unbelievers and members of the Antichrist's forces should make us pause and reflect. It is a command from a stern and emotionless Christ figure that annihilates in very graphic and dramatic ways so many human lives. It draws its 'inspiration' from Revelation 19:11-21, a passage filled with gore and the slaughter of God's enemies (based on Isaiah 49:2 and 63:1-6). This image of Christ is virtually impossible to reconcile with the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount – the Christ who commands non-resistance, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love for one's enemies. The divine violence of apocalyptic writings contributes to the formation of our collective image of God. All too often this image portrays a harsh, punishing deity who is willing to kill to achieve divine goals.

The inherent dualistic outlook of apocalyptic encourages believers to engage in what psychologists call "splitting." When individuals have difficulty integrating aspects or qualities of self or others that they deem unacceptable, painful, or repugnant, they often split them into completely separate and opposing entities. This usually results in either idealization or denigration of people or groups – they become good or bad to the extreme. This is often projected out onto the world: our group is all good, but the other is completely evil. This was the case after 9/11 with many people: America is good, Islam (or anyone faintly resembling a Muslim) is evil. And Muslim extremists simply reverse this caricature of reality. It prevails in many of our ethical debates with abortion being a perfect example. It poisons our political process. We become capable only of a binary mode of thinking – everything is expressed as either/or, good/bad, yes/no. Rather than engaging in rational discussion of issues that are difficult and complex, the religious orthodoxy, personal integrity, or patriotism and loyalty of those with whom we disagree are often questioned or attacked. The rhetoric becomes so unbelievably shrill and the opposition is painted in such negative and almost demonic terms that dialogue, civility, respect, or reconciliation become almost impossible. And how can it? If it is simply a battle between good and evil, compromise is impossible.

But is all apocalyptic theology inherently negative or violent? Its original intention was to bolster the courage and resistance of a persecuted group and to that end it counsels eschatological patience and endurance as well as the importance of making an immediate choice and commitment. It was originally a Jewish theological response to persecution during the Maccabean revolt and was expressed most eloquently in the Book of Daniel, especially chapters 7 and 12. There was a large body of apocalyptic literature at the turn of the era, and the early Christian movement borrowed extensively from it. Christianized forms of apocalyptic are found throughout the New Testament: Mark 13, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4-5, and the Book of Revelation are prominent examples.

An apocalyptic strain has always run through Christianity and it forms the basis of an important element of Christian belief – namely, the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. But there has been considerable confusion and disagreement over when the Second Coming is going to occur. Pinpointing a date and time and making the appropriate preparations has always been the work of apocalyptic movements both within mainstream Christianity and at its fringes. The Book of Revelation is the principle interpretative tool for these movements and this is a source of many problems. The cryptic and symbolic nature of the book is susceptible to reading into the text various one-to-one connections with contemporary events and individuals. The symbols and narrative are powerful and engage the unconscious, the emotions, and the religious imagination, exercising a tenacious hold on the consciousness of the fervent believer.

This engagement of human emotions and imagination is both the blessing and curse of apocalyptic. The one-to-one connection that many readers make with events and personages of their own time, together with the militant combat myth, have caused great harm in both Jewish and Christian settings. Apocalyptic – especially when tinged with messianic hopes – was discredited in Jewish eyes by two major disasters. The first was the second revolt against Rome in 132-136 A.D. that resulted in the thorough destruction and paganization of Jerusalem.⁸ The second was the apostasy of the messianic pretender Shabbatai Zevi in 1666.⁹

Jonathan Kirsch describes the battles depicted in Revelation as symbolizing a great “culture war” in which the Greco-Roman culture of the first century is portrayed as demonic and opposed to God. In the middle ages, in a continuation of the culture war, the enemies of God were corrupt church officials and clergy and their secular counterparts. Apocalyptic interpretations of Revelation provided energy for the followers of Joachim of Fiore, the Spiritual Franciscans, the Peasants Revolt of 1376, and finally the Reformation. Despite initial misgivings about Revelation, Luther enthusiastically portrayed the papacy as the Antichrist and the favor was returned. This helped to fuel apocalyptic hysteria and violence until the bloody suppression of the movement led by Thomas Münster in 1525. The dubious label of “Antichrist” or “Beast of Revelation” has been pinned on popes, emperors, kings, Muslims, and many others. There have been many modern candidates for the title, among them Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Anwar Sadat, and Henry Kissinger.¹⁰

The apocalyptic worldview and its symbolism are also significant players in contemporary culture wars. The language and symbolism of Revelation has been applied at times to ecumenism, feminism, meditation, abortion, homosexuality and same-sex marriage, the United Nations, non-Christian religions, the European Union, Jews, Masons, the Catholic Church, secular humanism, various types of psychology, and the barcodes used in

merchandising.¹¹ Nothing is quite safe, and by ramping up the religious rhetoric anything considered negative or abhorrent becomes evil and not merely erroneous. The conspiracy theory, with the disguised forces of darkness lurking everywhere, is a force to be reckoned with in contemporary culture.

Along the theological spectrum there are many interpretations of Revelation and the end times. Closer to the evangelical end of the spectrum, the symbolism of Revelation is believed to portray the world's final days and this is usually believed to be imminent. Towards the opposite end of the spectrum – usually represented by mainline churches – the events portrayed in Revelation are believed to be symbolic of a perennial struggle between godly forces and those of evil. The consensus of academic scholarship is that the message was addressed to the situation of a first-century audience and as such would have had to have been comprehensible to them. As a powerful psychological tool, it unmasked the pretensions of the seemingly invincible Roman Empire and demythologized it in the consciousness of the communities to which it was addressed. The message was loud and clear: God rules the world, not Rome. Pseudo-divinities such as the emperor Nero are usurpers and will be defeated by God in the end. Confessional differences in the interpretation of Revelation and other apocalyptic passages of the Bible will always exist. There can be, however, a reasonable consensus on some of the dangers and pitfalls of apocalyptic and religiously healthy ways of presenting apocalyptic's enduring spiritual message.

WARNING SIGNS OF CORRUPT RELIGION

The bulk of the problem lies with our understanding and application of apocalyptic theology. Kimball enumerates certain signs of corrupt religion that if unchecked can result in destructive energy and violence. Foremost among these signs is the tendency to contrast an idealized version of one's own religion with the most egregious flaws and defects of the religion of others. Apocalyptic contrasts the saved and unsaved as well as those who belong and those who do not very sharply. 'True' Christian believers are distinguished from 'false' ones. This slides very easily into reinforcing group identity against outsiders, whether they are non-believers, partial or 'defective' believers, or those who are different in any way. This tendency has fed into anti-Semitism, sectarianism, religious bigotry, as well as pogroms and crusades of all varieties. This group identity can also be turned inward and used to marginalize elements of one's own group such as women, laypeople, dissidents, or gays.

Blind obedience to charismatic authority figures or to religious institutions is a danger for all religions. But when this obedience is amplified by someone's claims to be the channel of privileged communications from God or special interpretive insight into the hidden meaning of apocalyptic symbolism, disaster and tragedy are often not far behind. The tragedies of Waco

and Jonestown were the result of narcissistic spirit-inflated egos attempting to enhance their own claims to power and absolute control over others. Openness to criticism and debate as well as the practice of discernment would have prevented the terrible loss of life. Kimball gives us a salutary warning: “Authentic religion engages the intellect as people wrestle with the mystery of existence and the challenges of living in an imperfect world.... Beware of any religious movement that seeks to limit the intellectual freedom and individual integrity of its adherents.”¹²

The manipulation of apocalyptic time is a dangerous enterprise. As a further sign of unhealthy religion many attempt to establish an ideal time, either in the past or in the future. In Christianity this might take the form of attempting a return to some idealized and pristine state of the Church in the distant past. But apocalyptic presents another possibility: rushing headlong to a time in the future in which God’s intervention has destroyed evil and ushered in God’s kingdom of peace and prosperity. The problem is that often eschatological patience is seriously lacking and some decide that God needs a helping hand – that is, they attempt to speed things along and force God’s hand. For example, there is a fervent desire (and occasional attempt) on the part of some ultra-orthodox apocalyptic Jewish groups with the support of some Christian evangelical allies to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem on the temple mount. But there is an appalling disregard for the fact that the space is occupied by two mosques very sacred to Muslims. The fact that the political consequences would be catastrophic is of little concern and is even seen as a necessary part of the final apocalyptic event and a spur to the return of Jesus.

Closely related to this is the danger of conducting foreign policy under the influence of an apocalyptic-infused mindset. Two recent American presidents have commented on their belief that we are living in the end times and have been willing to paint adversaries

in demonic terms. This is not a healthy imaginative window on the world for those who bear the authority and power to initiate a conventional or nuclear attack, especially when a final apocalyptic battle is seen by many as part of God’s plan. The real danger is that violent conflict is then seen as inevitable, even preordained, and it can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The manipulation of apocalyptic time is a dangerous enterprise. Often eschatological patience is seriously lacking and some attempt to speed things along and force God's hand. Violent conflict is seen as inevitable, even preordained.

HANDLING APOCALYPTIC THEOLOGY WITH CARE

Is Christianity inherently violent? Is there any place for apocalyptic in our faith? Several things should be kept in mind. First of all, the Book of Revelation was not viewed as the core of Christian faith in the very early church. In fact, it was viewed with distrust and suspicion, for it was so obtuse that the diverse interpretations were disruptive to church life and unity. For example, the Montanists in the second century were an apocalyptic product.¹³ Revelation tells us very little about Jesus Christ and nothing in the way of his teaching.

Secondly, there is considerable scholarly debate on the question of apocalyptic itself. Did the apocalyptic passages in the New Testament originate with Jesus or were they the product of the early church? While this remains a controversial issue, the consensus inclines towards the view that Jesus indeed shared in the apocalyptic worldview of Second Temple Judaism. But the debate should at least warn us against dogmatically clinging to apocalyptic as essential to Christian faith. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount should remain the canon within the canon and the interpretive key for the rest of the gospel. This Jesus reached out with compassion, respect, and mercy to the most despised and hated members of his culture regardless of their group identity, lifestyle, or their religion, and he forbade his followers to even think or speak evil of others. The values of the kingdom taught in the Sermon on the Mount were manifested perfectly in the life and person of Jesus himself.

If handled with care, apocalyptic theology still has much to offer us. Using the model of a cosmic and divine play or drama, it can help to demythologize our own institutions and deflate human pretensions and arrogance. As a theology of hope it counsels patient endurance and encourages us lest we be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the evil, injustice, and suffering in the world. The bar is raised very high for human justice and ethical behavior, and all human structures, institutions, and aspirations are measured by God's standards rather than ours and eventually it is God who is victorious. Even the dualism of apocalyptic is overcome after the process is complete: the earth is unified and reconciled, and the polarities of the former age—Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female—are transcended.

At its core apocalyptic is about new creation, transformation, and change. It remains for the skilled and imaginative preacher or teacher to tell the story of God's cosmic project and ultimate victory in ways that are inviting and attractive rather than frightening and violent. It is the nonviolent aspects that must be emphasized—the overcoming of our inner dualism in thought and action. Evil must be overcome and transformed by love and compassionate justice. Life and the issues it brings are complex, requiring rational dialogue, compromise, and humility. And above all, it must be continually emphasized that light and darkness, as well as good and evil, reside in every human being.

NOTES

1 Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 39.

2 Martin Marty, "Is Religion the Problem?" *Tikkun* 17 (March-April 2002): 19.

3 *Ibid.*, 20.

4 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, third edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 153–154.

5 *Ibid.*, 158.

6 *Ibid.*, 164–166.

7 Krister Stendahl, "Hate, Non-Retaliatio, and Love," *Harvard Theological Review*, 55:4 (1962): 349.

8 During the second Jewish-Roman war in 132-136 A.D., the Jewish rebels believed their military leader, Simon bar Kokhba, was the Messiah. He established a sovereign state for two and a half years, before Roman armies retook the Judean territory and the emperor Hadrian barred Jews from living in Jerusalem.

9 Shabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), a rabbi in the city of Smyrna on the western coast of Anatolia, declared in 1648 that he was the true Messiah. His followers, called Shabbateans, desired to make him sultan of the Ottoman Empire and to restore the nation of Israel. When Shabbatai's treason was discovered and he was brought before the sultan in 1666, Shabbatai committed apostasy and converted to Islam.

10 Jonathan Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World. How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 12. See also Paul Boyer, "The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, edited by Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 2003), 534–543.

11 Kirsch, *End of the World*, 220.

12 Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 72.

13 Montanus and two prophetesses had ecstatic experiences and proclaimed prophecies that superseded the apostolic teachings of the Church. The movement became increasingly extravagant and heretical in its claims.



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Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective

BY THOMAS S. KIDD

The history of American apocalyptic thought about Islam offers much reason for discouragement. Evangelical Christians have been too eager to gloss biblical prophecy with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam's demise.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many Christian Americans have expressed new interest in Islam. Often this interest is just a matter of seeking more information about Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an. But many American evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have placed increased focus on Islam and the apocalypse. The horrific collapse of the World Trade Center towers might well turn one's thoughts to the apocalypse, but something more than horror is at work among these conservative Protestants. For many of them, Islam and jihadist terror seems to fit into long-held ideas about the last days before the return of Christ. Although the details have changed over time, American Christians have actually been speculating about connections between Islam and the apocalypse for centuries. The level of apocalyptic interest generated by 9/11 is new. The pattern of thought is not.

For centuries, Protestant Christians have seen Islam as one of the chief religions over which Christ would triumph in the last days. In early America, colonists routinely commented on Islam, its supposedly duplicitous and violent nature, and its coming demise. Colonial Americans lived in a mental world where Islam was perceived as a major threat to Christianity, especially because of the imperial ambitions of the Ottoman Turks, and the aggressions of the Barbary pirates. The Ottomans had pursued expansion into

eastern and central Europe until losing decisively at Vienna in 1683. The Barbary pirates tormented European ships throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They routinely took European and American sailors captive, and sometimes forced them to work as slaves in North Africa. Popular accounts of Barbary captivity often highlighted attempts by the captors to force European Protestants to convert to Islam.

This background of violence and conflict prepared colonial Americans to take a very dim view of Muslims, especially in eschatology, or their theology of the last days. American Protestants often paired Islam and Roman Catholicism as the greatest enemies to Reformed Christianity. Colonial-era Protestants had even more enmity toward Catholicism than Islam because of the wars of the Reformation. Jonathan Edwards, the great evangelical theologian of the eighteenth century, was hardly alone in his opinions about the coming destruction of Roman Catholicism and Islam. "Those mighty kingdoms of Antichrist [Catholicism] and Mohammed that have made such a figure for so many ages together and have trampled the world under foot, when God comes to appear will vanish away like a shadow," he wrote.¹

Protestant critics of Islam based their ideas on the Bible, where they found prophetic clues to the rise of Islam that may seem surprising today. Most colonial American theologians adhered to a historicist mode of prophetic interpretation, meaning that they believed that many of the prophecies of books such as Daniel and Revelation had already been fulfilled in history. One of the most notable instances of prophecy fulfilled in history was Revelation 9:2-3. This passage speaks of locusts emerging from a smoky abyss. Anglo-American scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries almost universally believed that this passage referred to the rise of Islam in the early seventh century.

Aaron Burr, Sr. — Jonathan Edwards's son-in-law, and the father of the future Vice-President Aaron Burr, Jr. — offered a typical analysis of Revelation 9 and Islam in a 1757 sermon. According to Burr, when the Prophet Muhammad began his rise to power, he and his followers brought such misery and destruction to the Christian church that "it seemed as if the bottomless pit had been opened, and Satan at the head of the powers of darkness, come forth, according to the prophetic description of the rise of the impostor, Revelation 9:2.... The coming up of the locusts, and destruction they make wherever they go, emphatically represents the amazing and destructive progress of the Saracens [Muslims]."² Many like Burr referred to Muhammad as an "impostor," following the most popular biography of the Prophet in Anglo-American circles. This book by English theologian Humphrey Prideaux was tellingly titled *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet*.

Many in early America also anticipated that before the return of Christ, the political power of the Ottoman Turks would be ruined. Some believed

that the pouring out of the sixth vial of judgment and the drying up of the Euphrates River (Revelation 16:12) referred to the vanquishing of the Ottomans. Most agreed that prior to Christ's return, the great enemies of Christ's church, including Islam, would be swept aside.

The eras of the American Revolution and early American republic saw a major uptick in prophetic writings generally, and much of it included reflections on the rise and fall of Islam. Yale College President Timothy Dwight, preaching on the fourth of July, 1798, predicted the imminent demise of Islam. He particularly believed that its political power would end soon in Turkey and Persia (Iran), which were among the "chief supports of that imposture." These calamities for Islam added to Dwight's conviction that the "awful advent of the King of Kings" was just around the corner.³

The heightened interest in Bible prophecy in America's early republic peaked with the writings of the farmer and Baptist layman William Miller. He became famous for his forecasts that Christ would return in 1843 or 1844. Christ's failure to appear at the appointed hour became known as the Millerites' "Great Disappointment." Miller's date-setting was bold and unusual, but otherwise his views of prophecy were fairly typical for the time. He and his followers accepted the reading of Revelation 9:2-3 and 16:12 as referring to the rise and fall of Islam in prophecy.

Partly because of the embarrassment associated with Miller's failed predictions, the historicist mode of prophecy interpretation became less popular in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. At the same time, dispensational Bible interpretation became more prominent among Anglo-American Christians. Dispensationalists put a strong emphasis on prophecy, but they regarded most prophecies, especially those in Revelation, as yet to be fulfilled. Accordingly, dispensationalists typically regarded passages such as Revelation 9:2-3 as referring to future events, not the rise of Islam. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), the most popular text on dispensational theology, averred that Revelation 9:2-3 represented a surge of demonic activity during the reign of the coming Antichrist.

Dispensational theology also put political developments surrounding the nation of Israel at the center of eschatology. A number of Bible passages suggest a future redemption and restoration of Israel, and dispensationalist Christians (following many earlier Christians such as Jonathan Edwards) interpreted these passages as meaning that prior to the return of Christ, the world's Jews would accept Christ as their Messiah. Dispensationalists added new focus on the literal return of the Jews to the land of Palestine as an essential precursor to key events of the end times: the rebuilding of the Jewish temple, rise of the Antichrist, battle of Armageddon, and physical return of Jesus to Earth. The anticipation of these developments led to an associated focus on the people living in Palestine, particularly Arab Muslims.

Prophetic speculation about the return of the Jews to Palestine took on new life during World War I. In November 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour officially committed Britain to the concept of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Then, the next month saw the British capture Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks. To dispensationalists, the stage seemed to be set for the return of the Jews to their ancestral home. Pastor A. B. Simpson of the Christian and Missionary Alliance cried as he read the Balfour Declaration to his congregation, telling them that these events were “a signal from heaven, and the marking of an epoch of history and prophecy.”⁴

The British seizure of Jerusalem focused many conservative Protestants’ thoughts on the meaning of Luke 21:24, an apocalyptic passage in which Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be trampled underfoot until the “times of the Gentiles” had ended. Many Anglo-American observers have attempted to key Luke 21:24 to news events surrounding British, Arab, or Israeli control of the City of David.

The growing Zionist movement promoted Jewish immigration to Palestine through the 1920s and ‘30s, leading to growing tension and violence between local Arabs and the Jews. The Zionist cause gained unprecedented momentum as the details of the Nazi Holocaust became known, and world sentiment became more favorable toward a Jewish refuge in the Middle East. Finally, in 1948 Jewish settlers declared an independent Israel, resulting in the 1948-1949 Arab-Israeli war and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Arab Palestinians.

Many evangelicals viewed the return of the Jews to Palestine through the lens of Bible prophecy, and came to see the Arab Palestinians as on the wrong side of eschatological history. Increasingly, conservative Protestant observers painted the Arabs’ resistance to their displacement as futile, or even rooted in demonic rage

against God’s chosen people, the Jews. Not only would the Jews flourish in Israel, many evangelicals believed, but they would ultimately destroy the Muslim shrine on Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock. This would set the

stage for the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. Interpreting Jesus’ statement about the “abomination causing desolation” in Matthew 24:15, many believed that the Antichrist would eventually desecrate the Temple and proclaim himself as God. These events were inexorable, and the Arabs only stood in the way of the fulfillment of prophecy, according to observers such as Fuller Seminary’s Wilbur Smith. “No anti-Semitism, no wars, no unbelief,

The eras of the American Revolution and early American republic saw a major uptick in prophetic writings, and much of it included reflections on the rise and fall of Islam.

no pogroms, not Antichrist himself will be able to prevent the fulfillment of these divinely given promises," Smith wrote in 1956.⁵

Although Arab Muslims would eventually take their place as the chief eschatological opponent of Israel, the atheistic, anti-Semitic Soviet Union played that role in the mid-twentieth century. Many prophecy writers believed that the Soviets' eventual invasion of Israel was foretold in Ezekiel 38 and 39, which depicted the mysterious attack and destruction of "Gog and Magog." Gog and Magog, an army from the north, would assault Israel, but be miraculously ruined in a hail of fire and brimstone. Dispensationalist writers have been divided over the exact identity of Gog and Magog, but they have increasingly given Arab Muslims a key role in the attack. Since 9/11, some writers have even removed the Russians altogether from Gog and Magog, and seen it exclusively as a Muslim force rising against Israel. In any event, dispensationalists have conventionally believed that Gog and Magog's destruction would set the stage for the rise of the Antichrist, who would make, and then break, a seven-year peace treaty with Israel. This would lead to the darkest episode of the end times, the brutal reign of the Antichrist, the destruction of Jewish Christian converts, and the battle of Armageddon. Although these interpretations may seem obscure or even bizarre to outsiders, they have offered an effective means for dispensationalists to explain the disturbing events surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict.

By the time of the Six Day War of 1967, American evangelicals had become accustomed to interpreting news from the Middle East by reference to dispensationalist prophecy interpretation. The Six Day War was a triumph for the Israelis, who decimated the armed forces of Jordan, Egypt, and Syria, and captured East Jerusalem from the Jordanians. This let loose another round of speculation regarding the "times of the Gentiles" and Arab rule over Jerusalem. The most popular dispensationalist interpretation of the Six Day War was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), which stands as one of the most influential books of end-times prophecy ever. Lindsey saw the Six Day War as the end of the times of the Gentiles, and he speculated that the Jews would soon proceed to rebuild the Temple. He noted that the Dome of the Rock stood in the way, and speculated that God might wreck the Dome of the Rock by a providential earthquake. Sensational as it may seem, there is no doubt concerning the popularity of this kind of dispensationalist writing. *The Late Great Planet Earth* went on to become the best-selling non-fiction book of the 1970s in the United States.

Lindsey's wild success in *The Late Great Planet Earth* injected a new dynamic into prophecy writing: commercialism. A host of writers since 1970, including most famously Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the authors of the *Left Behind* series, have shown publishers the mammoth potential of popular books on prophecy. Another popular writer on the Middle East crisis was Dallas Theological Seminary's John Walvoord. His *Armageddon*,

Oil, and the Middle East Crisis was originally published as a response to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and also appeared in an updated 1990 edition in reaction to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Another revised edition, co-authored with his student Mark Hitchcock, appeared posthumously in 2007, with new attention to Muslim terrorism. All told, the book sold millions of copies. Walvoord did not depart dramatically from earlier versions of dispensational prophecy, but he gave the question of oil and the Arab-dominated OPEC a new centrality to the events of the end times. Global greed for oil would prepare the way for a European/Middle Eastern alliance that Walvoord called the "Mediterranean Confederacy," the organization of nations the Antichrist would eventually come to rule.

Before 9/11, Islam had played a significant role in American apocalyptic thought. But the terrorist attacks sharpened Protestant conservatives' attention to Islam like no other event. Often, the initial reaction was anger and rage toward Islam itself. Samaritan Purse's Franklin Graham called Islam a "very evil and wicked religion," while Liberty University founder Jerry Falwell opined on *60 Minutes* that the Prophet "Muhammad was a terrorist." Most notoriously, former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines said in 2002 that Muhammad was a "demon-possessed pedophile."

By 2001, conservative American Protestants also had a long, deep tradition of apocalyptic thought to draw upon in order to interpret the horrible events of September 11. Those events generated an explosion of interest in Islam and prophecy, but that interest was channeled into already-existing patterns of Bible interpretation. Popular pastor John Hagee of San Antonio asserted in his book *Attack on America: New York, Jerusalem, and the Role of Terrorism in the Last Days* (2001) that the terrorist violence revealed again the natural hatred of Muslims for the friends of Israel. Hagee believed that in the last days—perhaps quite

soon—the Arab Muslims surrounding Israel would ally with Russia in the Gog and Magog attack, but that it would be miraculously foiled by God.

One substantially new line of thinking in apocalyptic thought since 9/11 is,

ironically, a product of Americans' greater familiarity with the basics of Muslim theology. Some prophecy writers have begun to speculate that the messianic figure that Shi'a Muslims call the Mahdi is actually going to be the Antichrist. This is the view of books like Ralph Stice's *From 9/11 to 666* (2005) and Joel Richardson's *Antichrist: Islam's Awaited Messiah* (2006). In Stice's scenario, the Mahdi would force people to take a laser-burned mark

Before 9/11, Islam had played a significant role in American apocalyptic thought. But the terrorist attacks sharpened Evangelicals' attention to Islam like no other event.

of the Muslim creed, with the threat of beheading if they refused. It is difficult to say whether the new role for the Mahdi in conservative Christian apocalyptic thought represents a momentary fad or a lasting trend.

The history of American apocalyptic thought about Islam offers much reason for discouragement, as conservative Christians have seemed all too eager to gloss biblical prophecy with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam's demise. But we should also note that the purveyors of apocalypse have not cornered the market on conservative Christian opinion in America. To cite only one example, evangelical Baptist theologian Timothy George, the Dean of Beeson Divinity School, wrote a popular book titled *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? Understanding the Differences between Christianity and Islam* (2002) just after 9/11. While George maintained that fundamental theological differences divided Muslims and Christians, he also asked American Christians to emphasize charity and understanding with Muslims as far as they possibly could. He steered readers away from condemnations of all Muslims, or the Prophet Muhammad. George recommended that Christians take Muslim theology seriously, and noted that the Prophet's monotheism was a critical step in the direction of divine truth. However, George reminded readers that Christian and Muslim understandings of God were irreconcilably different, with the Muslims emphasizing the absolute unity of Allah, and Christians seeing God as both one and three in his Trinitarian nature. One could point to a host of conservative Christian commentators (and Christians of other stripes) who have quietly maintained a peaceable witness regarding Muslims despite the din of apocalyptic noise, even in times like those following 9/11.

Christians often seem to indulge extremes when it comes to Islam, either denouncing all Muslims as violent and demonic, or (as is the case with some more liberal Christians) papering over all differences with hopeful assertions that we are all God's children. Perhaps there is a middle way. Christians should refuse to indulge sensational characterizations of Muslims or the Prophet Muhammad, or ghoulish scenarios of Muslims' demise in the last days. But honest understanding and dialogue with Muslims must also acknowledge that there are essential differences between the faiths that cannot be ignored. But these differences give no one, either Muslim or Christian, the right to harm, insult, or demonize the other. Anger over jihadist terror does not license the invention of extra-biblical forecasts of apocalyptic destruction. Unfortunately, those forecasts are often where conservative Christians have turned to make sense of the religious and political challenge of Islam.⁶

NOTES

1 Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, edited by John F. Wilson, volume 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 524.

2 Aaron Burr, *The Watchman's Answer* (Boston, 1757), 17-18.

3 Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis* (1798), in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, second edition, volume 2 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1392.

4 Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Tyler, TX, 1991, [1977]), 44.

5 Wilbur M. Smith, "Israel in Her Promised Land," *Christianity Today*, 1:6 (December 24, 1956), 11.

6 This article is based on material from Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Used by permission.



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Worship Service

BY JOHN S. WOODS

Prelude

Call to Worship

Today we gather
 to offer ourselves to God.
Today we sing
 in gratitude for Christ's gift.
Today we imagine
 through the sacred words of Scripture.
Today we hope
 in the promised reign of God.
Today we listen
 for the Spirit's whisper.
Today we prepare
 to more fully welcome Christ.
Today we proclaim
 we have come to worship God.

Chiming of the Hour

*Silent Meditation*¹

Bracketed between the first
tentative prayer, a silence fills
this place, a shadowed listening
as our separateness seeks out
the Spirit's focus for this hour
and gathers strength enough
to peer and soar
into small, shining arcs of praise
held at their lower ends
by the old hymns. Christ
in this crowd of rest and rising
humbles himself again to our
humanity; and like the sheep
(trembling in the shearer's hands)
surrenders to us once more
in quietness.

Luci Shaw

Introit Hymn

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” (verses 1, 3, and 4)

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded,
for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.

At his feet the six winged seraph;
cherubim, with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the Presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Lord Most High.

Liturgy of St. James (fifth century); *translated by Gerard Moultrie* (1864)
Tune: PICARDY

Choral Prayer of Gratitude²

“Pilgrim’s Hymn”

Even before we call on your name
to ask you, O God,
when we seek for the words to glorify you,
you hear our prayer;
unceasing love, O unceasing love,
surpassing all we know.

Glory to the Father,
and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit.

Even with darkness sealing us in,
we breathe Your name,
and through all the days that follow so fast,
we trust in you;
endless your grace, O endless your grace,
beyond all mortal dream.

Both now and for ever,
and unto ages and ages,
Amen.

Michael Dennis Browne (1997)

Music: Stephen Paulus (1997)

Words © 1997 Michael Dennis Browne

Praying for the World

Caring God,
sovereign of every corner of creation,
hear our prayers on behalf of our sisters and brothers
across the street and around the globe.

(The congregation is invited to pray for the needs of the world. Prompts for prayer may be printed in the worship guide or projected. A prayer chime signals the congregation to attend to the next prayer emphasis.)

Prayer of Confession and The Lord's Prayer

Highest God,
You are our Father in heaven,
yet we have ignored your loving guidance;
we fail to acknowledge your place as Creator above creation.
Your name is to be honored,
yet "me" and "I" pervade our speech;
we speak your name only in sudden crisis or panicked alarm.
Your kingdom should be our priority,
but we find it much easier to make excuses for what is,
instead of acting to bring heaven to earth.
You provide all that we need,
yet we silently take from the provision of others
and claim it as blessing.
You forgive our many sins,
but we would rather cling to what we know,
resisting the changes you require.
You pardon all those who sin against you,
and still we keep score and hold grudges,
calling it "justice."
You deliver us from evil and are present in the midst of trial,
yet our faith is constantly wavering.
Yet we want to be different,
we want to practice what we preach;
so we practice by praying as you taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Song of Forgiveness and Praise

“Rejoice, the Lord is King” (verses 1, 2, 3, and 6)

Rejoice, the Lord is King:
your Lord and King adore!
Rejoice, give thanks and sing,
and triumph evermore:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Jesus, the Savior, reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains,
he took his seat above:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

His kingdom cannot fail,
he rules o’er earth and heav’n;
the keys of death and hell
are to our Jesus giv’n:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Rejoice in glorious hope!
Our Lord and judge shall come
and take his servants up
to their eternal home:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Tune: DARWALL’S 148TH

Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Song of Response

“God of Grace and God of Glory” (verses 1, 2, 3, and 5)

God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power.
Crown your ancient church’s story,
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

Lo! the hosts of evil ’round us,
scorn your Christ, assail his ways.
Fears and doubts too long have bound us,
free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the living of these days,
for the living of these days.

Heal your children’s warring madness,
bend our pride to your control.
Shame our wanton selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
lest we miss your kingdom’s goal,
lest we miss your kingdom’s goal.

Save us from weak resignation,
to the evils we deplore.
Let the gift of your salvation,
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore,
serving you whom we adore.

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1930), alt.
Tune: CWM RHONDDA

Sermon

Call to Imagination

“A Searing, Blazing Hope”

Terry W. York
(pp. 60-62 of this volume)

Benediction

May the Creator who called you to imagine in Christ’s name and for Christ’s people,
give you the faith to walk unknown paths,
the courage to walk with humility,
the audacity to speak what matters,
and the joy of journeying with others,
so that all God’s people might catch a vision of “Thy Kingdom come,”
in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOTES

1 Luci Shaw, “Bethany Chapel,” *Polishing the Petoskey Stone: Selected Poems* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 208. Used by permission of the author.

2 Michael Dennis Browne, “Pilgrim’s Hymn,” © 1997. Used by permission of the author. This hymn concludes “The Three Hermits,” a church opera based on a story by Leo Tolstoy. The opera, with music composed by Stephen Paulus, premiered in 1997 at House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. SATB and SSAATTBB arrangements for church choir are available from Paulus Publications, 1719 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105, and online at www.stephenpaulus.com.



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A Searing, Blazing Hope

B Y T E R R Y W . Y O R K

A searing, blazing hope is found
within the gospel of our Christ;
it lights all darkness, melts all chains
with truth's persistent flame.

This bold, courageous hope is stirred
inside the heart that follows Christ;
before earth's kings it boldly stands,
but bows before Christ's name.

From deep inside this world's sane truth
burns hotter still the truth of Christ:
burns humbler, yes, but bolder too,
not weak, nor dim, nor tame.

A boundless sense of time is found
within the gospel of our Christ;
the timeless, bright, Refiner's fire
burns then and now, the same.

All nature stretches toward the hope
within the gospel of our Christ;
all wildlife, water, earth, and air
Redeemer's love can claim.

A searing, blazing hope is found
within the gospel of our Christ;
restoring justice, mercy, peace,
with truth's eternal flame.

A Searing, Blazing Hope

TERRY W. YORK (ASCAP)

G. DAVID BOLIN

A sear - ing, blaz - ing hope is found with -
 This bold, cou - ra - geous hope is stirred in -
 From deep in - side this world's sane truth burns
 A bound - less sense of time is found with -
 All na - ture stretch - es t'ward the hope with -
 A sear - ing, blaz - ing hope is found with -

in side the gos - pel of our Christ; it lights all dark - ness,
 the heart that fol - lows Christ; be - fore earth's kings it
 hot - ter still the truth of Christ; burns hum - bler, yes, but
 in the gos - pel of our Christ; the time - less, bright, Re -
 in the gos - pel of our Christ; all wild - life, wa - ter,
 in the gos - pel of our Christ; re - stor - ing jus - tice,

melts all chains with truth's per - sis - tent flame.
 bold - ly stands, but bows be - fore Christ's name.
 bold - er too, not weak, nor dim, nor tame.
 fi - ner's fire burns then and now, the same.
 earth, and air Re - deem - er's love can claim.
 mer - cy, peace, with truth's e - ter - nal flame.

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Tune: KILAUEA
 8.8.8.6.

❖ Other Voices ❖

The revelation [apocalypse] of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

REVELATION 1:1-3

As a literary genre, “apocalyptic” is a way of investing space-time events with their theological significance; it is actually a way of affirming, not denying, the vital importance of the present continuing space-time order, by denying that evil has the last word in it.

N. T. WRIGHT, *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992)

In our confusion, we’re accustomed to according the titles of good news and “a positive message” to the most soul-sucking, sentimental fare imaginable. Any song or story that deals with conflict by way of a strained euphemistic spin, a cliché, or a triumphal cupcake ending strikes us as the best in family entertainment. This is the opposite of apocalyptic. Apocalyptic maximizes the reality of human suffering and folly before daring a word of hope (lest too light winning make the prize light). The hope has nowhere else to happen but the valley of the shadow of death. Is it any surprise that we often won’t know it when we see it?

DAVID DARK, *Everyday Apocalypse* (2002)

Apocalyptic is as much involved in the attempt to understand things as they are now as to predict future events. The mysteries of heaven and earth and the real significance of contemporary persons and events in history are also the dominant interests of the apocalypticists. There is thus a concern with the world above and its mysteries as a means of explaining human existence in the present.

CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (1982)

The apocalyptic literature...rejects the widespread perception that salvation is individual and spiritual, focused on the fate of individual souls after death. Countering this narrow and spiritualizing view, it insists that God’s

saving goals encompass global human society, worldwide ecology, and even space/time reality....

The apocalyptic vision of salvation claims to be relevant for the here and now, as well as for the end times. It gives readers a “sense of an ending” to existence and history, assuring them that the life of faith has a satisfying conclusion despite appearances to the contrary.

STEPHEN L. COOK, *The Apocalyptic Literature* (2003)

Apocalyptic shows us what we’re not seeing. It can’t be composed or spoken by the powers that be, because they are the sustainers of “the way things are” whose operation justifies itself by crowning itself as “the ways things ought to be” and whose greatest virtue is in being “realistic.” Thinking through what we mean when we say “realistic” is where apocalyptic begins. If these powers are the boot that, to borrow Orwell’s phrase, presses down upon the human face forever, apocalyptic is the speech of that human face. Apocalyptic denies, in spite of all the appearances to the contrary, the “forever” part.

For both the very human wielder of the boot and the very human face beneath it, apocalyptic has a way of curing deafness and educating the mind.

DAVID DARK, *Everyday Apocalypse* (2002)

Perhaps Christians in our age are being made ready for a new awareness of the continuing relevance of the message of the Apocalypse. There is a widespread recognition that Western society is moving toward the collapse of the mentality that has been identified with Christendom. Christians must recognize that they are a minority globally and locally in the midst of the followers of non-Christian and post-Christian faiths. Perhaps this will prepare us to see how inappropriate and preposterous was the prevailing assumption, from the time of Constantine until yesterday, that the fundamental responsibility of the church for society is to manage it.

And might it be, if we could be freed from the compulsiveness of the vision of ourselves as the guardians of history, that we could receive again the gift of being able to see ourselves as participants in the loving nature of God as revealed in Christ.

JOHN HOWARD YODER, *The Politics of Jesus* (1972)

If we do not permit ourselves to form images of personal and collective existence after death, then we have no way of testing who we are or of sounding our deepest ideals. It’s not that we need to know the details of the world to come—life is short and we will get our data soon enough—but that we need to imagine.

CAROL ZALESKI, *The Life of the World to Come: Near-Death Experience and Christian Hope* (1996)

This image is available in
the print version of
Christian Reflection.

**With an apocalyptic imagination heated by a fearful faith,
Gislebertus attempted to instill fear of God's judgment in
those who entered the cathedral of St. Lazare.**

Terrible Judgment

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Every narrow street of Autun, France, leads to its cathedral of St. Lazare. This small town, tucked neatly into the side of a hill in the Burgundy region, was once a major village of Roman Gaul – its name comes from *Augustodunum*, town of Augustus Caesar. Later in medieval times it became one of the busiest, most important towns in Europe.¹

The cathedral was constructed in about 1120 to accommodate the many leprous pilgrims attracted by the relics of their patron saint Lazarus, which were transferred from St. Nazaire in Autun.² These pilgrims were met by the sculpture *The Last Judgment* above the main portal, or entrance, in a semicircular area called a tympanum. The sculpture is signed “*Gislebertus hoc fecit*” (Gislebertus made this) immediately below the figure of Christ in the center, confirming the sculptor’s identity in a way that is uncommon in the medieval era.

The iconography of the sculpture is Byzantine: to depict Mary enthroned in heaven in a Last Judgment scene (in the upper left area of the tympanum) is a Middle Byzantine element that has no precedents in western art.³ Christ is in the center of the composition in a *mandorla*, or almond frame. The inscription around the frame, held by four angels, reads: “I alone dispose of all things and crown the just; those who follow crime I judge and punish.” Above it are medallions that contain the Sun and the Moon.

Below Christ the dead are rising. Lined up along the lintel, or lower horizontal band, they wait to have their souls weighed. On Christ’s right, Peter and eight Apostles welcome those who are entering heaven. On Christ’s left is the area of damnation. An inscription above contrasts the joy of the blessed – “Thus shall rise again everyone who does not lead an impious life, and endless light of day shall shine for him” – with the despair of the damned – “Let fear strike those whom earthly error binds, for their fate is shown by the horror of these figures.”⁴ The scale on which the dead will climb to be weighed is located in the lower right portion of the tympanum.

Gislebertus shows us the fearful process as giant hands pluck one being directly below the scales. An angel with a trumpet summons all creatures to judgment. Humankind’s pitiful weakness and littleness are distilled in terror-stricken, weeping, doll-like forms. Angels and devils fight at the scales

This image is available in
the print version of
Christian Reflection.

Gislebertus, detail of West Tympanum, THE LAST JUDGMENT (c. 1130-1135). Limestone. St. Lazare, Autun, France. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

where souls are being weighed as each tries to manipulate the scale for or against a soul. There are hideous demons on the right side whose legs end in claws. The devil is leaning from the dragon mouth of Hell and drags souls in. Above him, a howling demon crams souls head first into a furnace.

By 1766, the apocalyptic imagery of the tympanum was considered offensive and it was covered with plaster. Since the head of Christ projected outwards, in order to create a level plastered surface it was broken off. It was rediscovered and restored to its position in 1948.⁵

Scholars believe that Gislebertus, aided by assistants, completed his work at Autun in ten years between 1125 and 1135. He sculpted four capitals that tell the story of the Wise Men and the childhood of Christ.⁶ The culmination of his achievement is the depiction on the west portal tympanum of the Last Judgment. Its grandeur and apocalyptic message can still be understood and appreciated today.

NOTES

1 Régine Pernoud and Canon Grivot, *The Story of the Wise Men According to the Gospel of Saint Matthew and Carved by Giselbertus* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 26.

2 Lazarus is the patron saint of people suffering from leprosy. One medieval legend says that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany (the friend whom Jesus raised from the dead) sailed to France. Lazarus of Bethany is sometimes conflated with the poor character in Jesus' story of the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), who waited at the gate "covered with sores" and "longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs

would come and lick his sores" (16:20b-21). Both biblical figures were associated with God's judgment of sin. In Hades the rich man begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus "to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment" (Luke 16:27-28). Before Jesus calls Lazarus of Bethany from the tomb, his sister Martha rebukes the Lord, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:24).

3 Don Denny, "The Last Judgment Tympanum at Autun: Its Sources and Meaning," *Speculum* 57:3 (July, 1982): 532-547.

4 T. F. C. Blagg and Kathryn Morrison, "Autun," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed November 21, 2009), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T005225.

5 Ibid.

6 Pernoud and Grivot, *The Story of the Wise Men*, 4-25.



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This image is available
in the print version of
Christian Reflection.

Demonstrating the dramatic power and new possibilities of the black-and-white woodcut, Albrecht Dürer revolutionized the form of biblical illustrations.

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE from the APOCALYPSE series (1498). Woodcut, 15 ¼" x 11". British Museum, London. Photo: © The Trustees of The British Museum / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Apocalyptic Visions in Black and White

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

When Albrecht Dürer self-published his collection of fifteen woodcuts, *The Apocalypse* (1498), he drew their remarkable imagery from passages in the Book of Revelation. This work continues to influence how artists employ the woodcut technique and how believers interpret the apocalyptic visions of Scripture.

Woodcut is a relief printing technique in which the intended image is created in reverse on a block of wood. The artist must cut away the negative spaces, leaving the printing surface raised above other portions of the block. Since this design will be reversed left-to-right by printing, it must be the mirror reverse of the intended image. Previously, the woodcut technique had been used to produce outlines of objects that were filled in with colors applied by hand. Instead, Dürer used hatching to create a variation in tonal values that gave texture and depth to the objects. He created “color” with line and design. This elevated the woodcut as a method of printing equal to engraving.¹



In one of his most famous woodcuts, the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (p. 68), Dürer compresses these apocalyptic images into one scene:

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts

of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

Revelation 6:1-8

The far horseman, drawing his bow, represents Pestilence. The second, wielding a sword, represents War. The third, swinging the empty scales of justice, represents Famine. In the foreground, Death with a pitchfork is sweeping citizens and a king (or bishop) into the mouth of Hades.² Dürer conveys the riders' swift and terrible movement through their windblown draperies and the recoiling humanity about to be trampled by their horses.



St. Michael and the Dragon (p. 71) depicts the archangel leading an angelic army to conquer the dragon, symbolic of the Devil and Satan:

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world--he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God."

Revelation 12: 7-10

Michael, who is one of seven archangels mentioned in Scripture, traditionally is depicted as the defender of the Church. His feast day on September 29, called Michaelmas, has been celebrated since the sixth century. In Italian art, Michael is usually depicted as a youth, but here Dürer depicts the archangel as a mature man stabbing the dragon while other angels fend off demonic creatures.



Albrecht Dürer was apprenticed to his father, a goldsmith in Nuremberg, at age thirteen or fourteen. At the completion of this training, he told

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Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), ST. MICHAEL AND THE DRAGON from the APOCALYPSE series (1498). Woodcut, 15 ¼" x 11". Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. Photo: © Giraudon / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

his father that he wanted to be a painter. So, his father arranged an apprenticeship with the Nuremberg painter Michael Wolgemut (1434-1519), whose workshop was on the same street as the Dürer shop. In Wolgemut's shop, Dürer learned the fundamentals of painting and draftsmanship. He especially favored copying the engravings of Martin Schongauer (c. 1448-1491), and was strongly influenced by the style of Wolgemut's book illustrations, which treated the woodcut much like a painted composition.

When Dürer completed his painting apprenticeship at age eighteen and became a journeyman, like most contemporary artists he traveled to study the art of the northern Netherlands. He looked forward to meeting Schongauer in person, but the famous printmaker had just died. Schongauer's brothers provided an introduction to a fourth brother living in the Swiss city of Basel, the center of academic and literary publishing, and a hotbed of

humanistic thought. The young artist quickly became popular for creating woodcuts depicting saints, peasants, grotesque human follies, and moral tales in the new style that he had learned in Nuremberg.

Returning to his hometown of Nuremberg in 1494, Dürer married Agnes Frey. Soon he began to experiment with Italian classicism, and traveled to Venice briefly to study the human figure (draped and nude) and the figure's relationship to space and movement in a composition. The influence of this Italian sojourn was profound in Dürer's religious and secular scenes. He created a series of Greek mythological subjects executed with exquisite nudes and a careful drawing from nature.³

It was at this time that Dürer produced three woodcut series of religious subjects: *The Apocalypse* (1498), a *Large Woodcut Passion* cycle (c. 1497-1500), and the *Life of the Virgin* (begun c. 1500), which was based on the Gospel of Luke and apocryphal writings.

Many art historians consider Albrecht Dürer to be the greatest German artist because of his many contributions to painting, drawing, woodcut, and especially the printmaking techniques of engraving. Dürer selected his media in regards to subject matter, doing most secular subjects (ancient mythology or contemporary genre) in engraving, and producing all of the devotional series in woodcut. He was considered a genius as a child, and his wide-ranging accomplishments are often compared to those of his great Italian contemporary, Michelangelo (1475-1564).

NOTES

1 Katharina Mayer Haunton, et al., "Woodcut," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed November 20, 2009), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T092165.

2 Some scholars interpret *The Apocalypse* as the artist's commentary on corruption in pre-Reformation Europe. See David Price, "Albrecht Dürer's Representations of Faith: The Church, Lay Devotion and Veneration in the *Apocalypse* (1498)," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 57 Bd., H. 4 (1994): 688-696.

3 Peter Strieder, "Dürer," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed November 20, 2009), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T024180pg1.



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The End of It All

BY BRETT YOUNGER

The rider on the white horse and the party in heaven in Revelation 19 seem far away most days, but what we believe about the future affects how we live. Believing that the end belongs to God breaks the power of the world and fills us with hope that continues even in sorrow.

Revelation 19

I have a good friend who works hard to keep me informed by sending op-ed pieces from *The New York Times*, articles from *Christian Century*, and Texas Aggie jokes. Every now and then he emails, for reasons only he understands, an update from the *Rapture Index*. The purpose of this Web site is to “eliminate the wide variance that currently exists with prophecy reporting” into a “cohesive indicator.” The *Rapture Index* is a “Dow Jones of end times, a prophetic speedometer. The higher the number the faster we’re moving towards the rapture.”

These people with too much time on their hands list forty-five categories in which they assign a score of one to five. Indicators of the end of the world include the occult, Satanism, false prophets, the mark of the beast, the Antichrist, earthquakes, floods, plagues, unemployment, inflation, interest rates, globalism, ecumenism, liberalism, and civil rights. Civil rights? The scale for the total score ranges from below 85 (“slow prophetic activity”) to above 145 (“fasten your seat belt”). The index as of the last time I checked was 164.¹ Try to stay calm.

The goofiness that surrounds the Second Coming is embarrassing. The clearest thing Jesus ever said was, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13; cf. Mark 13:32 and Matthew 24:36). Fortunetellers have been guessing the day and hour ever since.

In the year 1000 A.D., a flurry of predictions led many Christians to sell their homes. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther said the Pope was the

Antichrist and so he expected Jesus soon. Christopher Columbus thought his explorations would lead to the final crusade. William Miller predicted the Second Coming would take place in 1843. His followers, the Seventh Day Adventists, have adjusted their schedule. Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, predicted the apocalypse would be in 1914. They also have postponed the end of the world.

Before we pitch the Second Coming entirely, we need to remember that while many of the answers we have come up with are foolish, the questions that started it all are not: "Will evil continue to win?" "At the end of it all, will God be there?"

The best selling religious book of the 1970s was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). The author predicted that Jesus would return in the next few years. He spent profits from the book on a mansion that took three years to build. When I was in junior high, an evangelist came to our church and said that Jesus would be back in less than five years. Every thirteen-year-old boy in our

church had the same thought: "I will never get to have sex." As the year 2000 approached, people began finding references to Y2K in the Book of Revelation. The Mayans have their money on 2012 for the end of the world.

The silliness surrounding the Second Coming seems as outdated as hand-written letters and real country music. Good church members are tempted to ignore the Second Coming altogether.

At first glance, Revelation 19 does not seem helpful in getting past the crazy stuff. This chapter will never replace Psalm 23 or the Parable of the Good Samaritan as believers' favorite biblical text. There are good reasons it does not show up in children's Sunday school literature. Some of it sounds like a comic book you would not want your twelve-year-old reading. John writes about a white horse whose rider has eyes of fire and clothes dipped in blood. He rides with a sharp sword in his mouth, leading an army on white horses to battle. My grandmother would not care for this at all: he has a tattoo on his thigh (Revelation 19:11-16). An angel calls for the birds to get ready to eat the flesh of the enemy (19:17-18). It is blood vengeance and eternal fire. No one in the Woman's Missionary Union ever crocheted, "Eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses – Revelation 19:18."

Even the less shocking parts of this text can be hard to take. "Hallelujah" can be awkward. We are suspicious of people who say "Hallelujah" too much. They are often the same people who have "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned" bumper stickers.

Before we pitch the Second Coming entirely, we need to remember that while many of the answers we have come up with are foolish, the questions that started it all are not: “When history finishes, what will be left?” “Will evil continue to win?” “At the end of it all, will God be there?”

The early Christians believed that the end of the world was just around the corner. They had urgent reasons to long for Christ’s return. John writes the Book of Revelation during a time of great persecution to assure frightened Christians that God will win.

If you were describing the end, what kind of language would you use? Would you use scientific language? Would you talk about the gases in the sun burning up, burning out, and taking our solar system with it?

Would you use theological language? Eschatologically speaking, the Parousia, or Second Coming, will be the end of history. Time will be no more as the finite gives way to the infinite.

Or would you use the kind of apocalyptic language John used? Would you work not at the most logical level of our ideas, but at the level of imagination? This is the language of white horses leading a victory charge, music overwhelming sorrow, and a party that will never end.

One day God’s people will join the choir singing the “Hallelujah Chorus.” George Handel probably made the right decision when he judiciously decided not to have us sing about “the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication” (19:2), but John insists God’s judgment is something to sing about. We are usually more comfortable with God’s mercy and kindness, but we should also give thanks for the destruction of evil.

Babylon’s smoke will rise forever. Some of the things the world loves most fondly are the objects of God most intense wrath.² The culture thinks it has taken the place of God, but it is wrong. The vast commercial and political empires will fall. Domitian, the Caesar who ruled at the time Revelation was written, conferred on himself the title “Our Lord and God,” but God and not Caesar will have the final word.³

The day is coming when God will make right all the world’s wrongs. God’s justice will roll down like Niagara Falls and sound like sharp cracks of thunder. God’s salvation should awaken gratitude. God’s glory should awaken reverence. God’s power should awaken trust.⁴

The twenty-four elders, representing the Church, and the four living creatures, the heavenly beings, will fall on their knees in adoration.⁵ The word “Hallelujah,” which means “Praise the Lord” appears only here in the New Testament, but it is in this chapter four times (19:1, 3, 4 and 6). Hallelujah! Amen! Thank you! Praise the Lord!

Christ who created wine at the wedding in Cana will throw the mother of all wedding celebrations. When the Bible pictures the relationship of Christ and the Church as that of a husband and wife, it is expressing the truth that there is a covenant between them and an everlasting union.⁶ The

prophets depict Israel as God's bride. Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom at a wedding. The picture is of love, joy, and fidelity.⁷

The Book of Revelation is too often left behind by Christians. The story reflects the theology of Christians who lived under persecution, so it may be hard for those who enjoy religious freedom and material prosperity to understand. The call for most of us is to follow Jesus while living in a seductive culture. For "many modern readers, our retirement plans, mortgages, investments, credit cards, and entertainment centers alienate us from John's [teaching]."⁸ How do we live faithfully in the wealthiest country in the world?

Christians can be victims of the Stockholm syndrome, the psychological response of starting to cooperate with one's captors. We too easily come to terms with evil winning the day. We have trouble believing the culture will ever be overthrown. We are used to the lies, but God's truth will win. We are used to innocent people dying, but God will give life eternal. We are used to being surrounded by despair, but God will bring hope. Evil, sorrow, and death will be swallowed up in the Hallelujah Chorus. The rider on the white horse and the party in heaven seem far away most days, but what we believe about the future affects the way we live each day.

Believing that the end belongs to God breaks the power of the world, and fills us with a hope that continues even in sorrow. Woodrow Wilson said, "I would rather fail in a cause that will ultimately triumph than to triumph in a cause that will ultimately fail."

If we believe that God will win, then sorrow is finally less permanent. The minister and scholar James Stewart describes a painting hanging in a museum in Scotland—a picture of a man playing chess with the devil in order to secure his soul. The man, who has only a few pieces on the board, looks dejected. Satan is smiling; he will soon checkmate the man. For years people came to the gallery and saw only hopelessness. Then one day a chess champion stood for hours looking at the chessboard. Finally he announced: "It's a lie. The king still has moves left."

The biggest questions for all of us remain: "Is the future still in God's hands? To what are we heading? Who will have the final word? What's going to happen?" God is going to happen. God will triumph. God is at the end of it all.

In New York City there's a church with a statue of the angel Gabriel on the roof. His horn is lifted to his mouth, ready to blow a mighty blast to announce God's coming. Day after day, Gabriel stands ready. Warmed by the summer sun, frozen by winter sleet, year after year goes by, but no mighty blast—not even a tentative toot. The streets of the city below are crawling with traffic, lined with apartments and businesses. There is birth, death, love, conflict, and a thousand shattered hopes between dawn and sunset every day. To most of the people on the street, Gabriel must seem silly, but if we listen carefully we may hear Gabriel clearing his throat. If we

listen carefully we may hear distant hoof beats, the roll of thunder, and the sound of a choir warming up.

NOTES

- 1The *Rapture Index* is online at raptureready.com/rap2.html.
- 2 Joseph Seiss, *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, ninth edition (New York: Cook, 1906), 3:199.
- 3 Suetonius reports the Emperor's sacrilege in *The Lives of the Caesars, Book 8: Domitian 13*, translated by J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 2:367.
- 4 William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, revised edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 2:169.
- 5 David MacLeod, "Heaven's Hallelujah Chorus: An Introduction to the Seven 'Last Things' Revelation 19:1-10," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 156 (January-March 1999), 76.
- 6 Marin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper, 1940), 375.
- 7 Roger A. Bullard, "Pictures at an Exhibition: Revelation 19:1-10," *Review and Expositor* 98 (Winter 2001), 116.
- 8 Warren Carter, "Left Behind," *Christian Century* (February 10, 2009), 8.



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An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond

BY HAROLD T. BRYSON

When John sees “a new heaven and a new earth,” he is not witnessing a replaced, but a redeemed heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because all of the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and all of the obstacles to intimacy are removed.

Revelation 21:1-8

Life is so much “with us” that we scarcely take time for anything but the present. Daily duties stare at us. We live so much in the present that little time is available to reflect on the past or to think about the future.

Meeting friends from high school and college may force us to talk about former years. Or when we look through a family picture album, we may think about what it was like “when.”

A severe illness, the death of a friend, or a national tragedy may move us to ask, “What is life like beyond the grave?” If occasionally our minds wander to thoughts about what it will be like after we die, we dwell on the subject for only a short while, and quickly move away.

Yet people would like to know if there is a life beyond death, and if there is one, what it is like. Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death & Life* became a *New York Times* bestseller in 2004. In this book Piper recounts a tragic car accident in which, according to medical personnel, he died instantly. While he lay lifeless in the car, he experienced what he describes as being awed by beauty and music and the glories of the afterlife. Later Piper returned miraculously to life on earth. He supposedly spent ninety minutes in heaven.

The success of Piper’s book and others like it indicates that people want to know what happens to them after they die. Inquirers could better turn to

divine revelation for this kind of insight. One of the best places to learn about the believer's experience of life after death is Revelation 21, where John portrays the life beyond in a variety of earthy symbols. John's vision from God gives the theological meaning of the life beyond. His expressions "a new heaven and a new earth" and "the new Jerusalem" give us insight into what believers call heaven.

This is not John's human speculation or imagination about the end times, but it is a divine revelation to John. The vision furnishes us with theological truths.

INTIMACY

When John writes that he "saw a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1a), he is not witnessing a *replaced* heaven and earth, but a *redeemed* or *rejuvenated* heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because all of the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and all of the obstacles to intimacy are removed.

John saw the New Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2b). This symbol depicts the greatest earthly intimacy between two human beings on a life of pilgrimage together. Marriage has many exciting experiences — taking trips together, creating a home together, having children together, and attending events together. Did you notice that the word "together" appears in all of the endeavors of marriage? Intimacy in marriage means more than just sexual union. It means the art of sharing life together. Some of the most memorable times that my wife Jane and I have are those times of simply being together. She may be on the couch reading the newspaper while I read a novel. Or we may head to the mountains with a picnic lunch to share by a flowing stream. The beauty of the mountains, the soothing sound of the stream, and even the good food cannot compare to the joy of our being together.

The Christian life resembles marriage because it is opening our lives to God. We do this through increasing intimacy with Jesus Christ. When life ends, the life beyond means intensified intimacy with Christ. Paul wrote, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Do you think Paul's concept of "gain" meant golden streets, pearly gates, and mansions? I do not think so. He meant that after death he would have greater intimacy with Christ. Beyond death, disciples will experience a greater intimacy with God because every barrier to right relationship will be removed. John says, "God himself will be with them" (21:3b).

I once thought about heaven in terms of what I would do and see there. Now, because of Scripture, I think of heaven in terms of this incredible intimacy with God and with God's people. Intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it involves community relationships with all those who love and serve God.

COMMUNITY

“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,” John continues (21:2a). This city is immense in size, with elaborate walls, foundations, and gates made of luxurious materials (21:9-27).

For a long time I could only think of heaven with literalistic descriptions. But in my pilgrimage of studying Revelation 21, I realized that the author did not have the mind of an architect or a decorator, but of a theologian. What is the theology (rather than the design or décor) of the New Jerusalem? It is a city filled with people, and its newness is in the regard to the redemption of human relationships.

Suspicion, disagreements, alienation, arguments, slander, and hatred characterize relationships in the “old earth,” where we live now. Court rooms are crowded with litigants over human conflicts; no matter how hard our leaders try, peace eludes them. In the New Jerusalem, however, redeemed people live together harmoniously: they love, respect, care, help, and encourage each other. It is a genuine community where everyone shares Christ as Savior and has been changed by him.

Life in the New Jerusalem has a new order of transformed relationships. The rabbinic illustration is old and I do not know its original source, but I love it.

Rabbi Mendel wanted to know what heaven and hell looked like, and the prophet Elijah took him to show him. Elijah led him into a large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a huge pot of spoons that were longer than their arms, and because the people could not eat with these spoons, they sat around the table and starved. Rabbi Mendel found this room and what he saw there so terrible that he quickly ran outside.... Then Elijah took Rabbi Mendel to heaven and into another large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a big pot of steaming soup on it. Around the table sat people with the same spoons, but they did not have to starve because they were feeding each other.†

WELLNESS

“[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” John explains. “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away (21:4). The inhabitants of the Holy City enjoy complete wellness. They have no more tears because everything that can rob life of vibrancy and joy has “passed away” in the New Jerusalem.

Think of all the battles that we have now with physical, emotional, and mental illnesses. We live with the debilitating dread of heart problems, cancer, Alzheimer’s, and numerous other diseases. We may be killed by accidents, storms, or terrorist attacks. Fear, anxiety, and depression plague us because while we live on earth, death is always a threat.

I once had a physician who was an amateur philosopher. After he examining me and writing a prescription, he startled me by admitting: "We live from one episode of sickness to another. We only have periods of wellness." While that philosophy is somewhat pessimistic, he was right. Perfect health eludes us in the old order of earth.

Nothing will cause God's people to suffer after death. Neither emotional anguish nor physical pain will be present in the New Jerusalem. They will not dread death, for death will have been abolished. It will be a wonderful experience of perfect wellness.

PERFECTION

At times people think they have found earth's idyllic place and experience. But they soon discover that life on earth is never ideal because of the continual presence of self will, self trust, and self assertion in everybody's life. These qualities make life on earth lack fulfillment.

In John's description of the New Jerusalem, he gave a profile of the population. He spoke first of those whose lives had been made perfect by Christ. They enjoy full fellowship with God and with God's people. Then John spoke of another group of people who still have a self-centered attitude: "The cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars" (21:8a). They are outside the city. Believers experience an existence free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others. The life beyond for believers involves the experience of sinless perfection.

My understanding of the life beyond for believers has taken a different direction. I once sang about a beautiful place with streets of gold and gates of pearl. I even thought of having a mansion in heaven. But my expressions changed when I took an authoritative look into the life beyond for believers recorded in Revelation chapter 21. Now I say, "Wow! What a wonderful future! Incredible intimacy with God, perfect relationships with people, complete wellness, and the absolute absence of evil—it cannot get any better than that!"

NOTE

† Dorothee Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 159-160.



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Leaving “Left Behind” Behind

BY JONATHAN SANDS WISE

Can biblical views of the end times, properly understood, survive the backlash against “Left Behind” theology of dispensationalists? Three books agree the ongoing debate must not detract from apocalypticism’s practical implication: that we should work in this world, filled with hope in God’s future.

As our teacher held up a large rocket-shaped song book, we would sit in the small attic of our church on miniature chairs and gleefully sing (or shout) “The Countdown” at the top of our lungs. “Somewhere in outer space, God has prepared a place for those who trust him and obey,” the song assured us, and then continued, “and though we don’t know when, Jesus will come again,” so call upon your Savior “while you may.” The song concluded, “three and two, the countdown’s getting lower every day!” with the clear message that we are almost at ‘one’ and... blastoff!

Though the image of God creating a heavenly home for us “somewhere in outer space” is quaint, and the song a seemingly innocent prompt toward faithfulness and wakefulness, its emphasis on our removal to an other-worldly heaven and countdown toward the Second Coming of Christ have made some question the truth and worth of both the song and the apocalypse that it seems to represent.

VARIETIES OF MILLIENNIALISM

Dispensational premillennialism, the view of the end times graphically depicted by the bestselling *Left Behind* series and assumed by “The Countdown,” predicts that Christ will come back to ‘rapture’ all Christians, taking

them to heaven before the onset of seven years of tribulation; then he will gloriously appear with all of the saints, rapidly defeat the Antichrist at Armageddon, and institute the millennium, his one-thousand-year reign on earth. As the first essay in Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung, eds., *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009, 208 pp., \$24.99) details, the history of such dispensationalism is quite short, beginning in the 1830s with the teaching of John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and England. Its effect has been disproportionate to its history, however, especially in America. For much of the early part of the twentieth century, dispensationalism was equivalent to fundamentalism, a force for truth and biblical conservatism in the face of mainline modernism and heresy.

Dispensational premillennialism represents only one of four main approaches to Christ's Second Coming. A close relative is historic premillennialism. Blomberg and Chung offer a generally readable and interesting collection of essays arguing for the relative merits of the historic version, as well as for the merits of premillennialism in general. With an essay outlining the recent history of millennial movements, an essay each on the Old Testament, Judaism, the New Testament, and the early Church, and other essays exploring the theological method of premillennialism, a Reformed and Covenantal approach to premillennialism, and holistic missiology, this edited volume covers most of the topics in good introductory fashion. While dispensationalism predicts a rapture before the tribulation, historic dispensationalism expects Christians to live through the tribulation before Christ comes to usher in a golden age of peace as the living Temple and Lord of earth. Historic premillennialists suggest that nothing in Scripture, Judaic tradition, or the experience or theology of the early Church should lead us to expect anything other than persecution and tribulation before the ultimate victory.

The other two main approaches to the end times, which Blomberg and Chung define in their introduction, are amillennialism and postmillennialism. Amillennialism, the most widely accepted view from the time of Augustine (354-430) until the 1800s, adopts a spiritual interpretation of Revelation 20:1-7, which describes Christ's millennial reign. Amillennialists hold Christ will not literally and physically rule on this earth at any time, but spiritually reigns for a figurative millennium now, after which he will create the new heaven and the new earth. Postmillennialism arose with the optimism engendered by the great missionary movements of the 1800s and argues that Christ will return after a great Christian millennium, a golden age ushered in by the labors of the Church.

Mainline denominations historically have been amillennialist, though general biblical illiteracy combined with the popular success of dispensationalism's pretribulation premillennialism has led many Reformed and Covenantal churches, including Presbyterian and Lutheran congregations,

to adopt this view of the end times. Barbara R. Rossing, a Lutheran professor of New Testament, argues strongly in *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004, 240 pp., \$15.00) that this is a scandalous state of affairs. Unlike the contributors to *Historic Premillennialism*, who make a strong biblical case against dispensationalism while retaining a respectful and fair tone throughout, Rossing is primed and ready to do verbal battle. Blomberg and Chung recognize that, though our views on the apocalypse certainly matter, they probably have been too significant at many times in history; in the conclusion, therefore, they adopt a “can’t we all just get along” view, while still insisting on the significance of the disagreements they are refereeing.

END TIMES EXPOSÉ

Barbara Rossing, on the other hand, has never met an argument against dispensational premillennialism that she does not like. But while her willingness to employ all arguments willy-nilly against dispensational views of the end times leads to a less than coherent positive position, the overall effect is undeniably a powerful cumulative case. It is ultimately unclear what view of the second coming Rossing supports, though she perhaps fits best into amillennialism; what is clear is what position she detests. While she is repetitive and ill-organized at points, her passion makes for a highly readable and engaging exposé of dispensationalist theology.

Rossing attacks the dispensationalist model on two grounds: “The dispensationalist system...must be challenged today both because of its false theology and also because of its growing influence on public policy” (p. 30). She charges more than twenty-five times that “this [dispensationalist] theology distorts God’s vision for the world,” and “is not biblical” (pp. 1-2), calling dispensationalist readings of Scripture “heresy” and “ridiculous interpretations” (pp. 48-49), and decrying dispensationalists’ focus on Armageddon as a “sickness” (p. 140).

While her rhetoric runs away with her at times, several of her arguments are quite powerful. Rossing’s discussion of the rapture is comprehensive and well-executed. As Blomberg points out in his essay in *Historic Premillennialism* as well, it is unclear in Jesus’ parable that says “one will be taken and one will be left” (Matthew 24:36-44; cf. Luke 17:20-37), which we should prefer – to be taken (as were those who were swept away in the great flood in Noah’s day!) or to be left behind. Dispensationalists – who interpret Jesus’ warning in Matthew 24:40 in light of Paul’s assurance that at the coming of the Lord “the dead in Christ will rise first” and living disciples will be “caught up” with them to meet Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) – look forward to being “taken” away from sinners and earthly tribulation. Rossing and Blomberg, however, argue that we are caught up with Christ much as a greeting party that goes out to meet a dignitary *comes back with him* into the city. Stephen L. Cook, in *The Apocalyptic Literature* (Nashville, TN:

Abingdon Press, 2003, 236 pp., \$22.00), further points out that Paul's contemporaries tended to speak of death as "snatching people away from the world, now and forever." "With the concept of rapture," Cook explains, "Paul offers a retort": death is indeed a snatching, but into life, not away from it (p. 180). Paul's vision is one of ingathering, not of separation, and all three books agree that a more careful reading demonstrates this fact.

The consistent message of Scripture and especially the Book of Revelation, Rossing argues, is that the only true power is "Lamb power," a lifestyle of vulnerability modeled on Christ. "In place of the vision of military Victory and power offered by Rome," she writes, "Revelation offers the amazing vision of the victory of God's slain Lamb, Jesus" (p. 108). Rossing's vision of hope is coherent and powerful, but it is difficult to see how she justifies this 'PG' version of Christ's return with the potent images of blood and warfare that we find in Scripture. Both dispensationalism and Rossing are forced at times into apparently strained readings of scripture texts, so the repeated charge that dispensationalism is *unbiblical* is both too strong and uncharitable. The better argument here would be that we can offer *better* readings of Scripture, and such an argument could be taken more seriously by opponents.

A CAREFUL RETURN TO SCRIPTURE

When Rossing does attempt to explain the blood and violence of Revelation, she usually employs on a historicist interpretation: the meaning of much of the book's imagery, she thinks, is exhausted by its reference to what occurred historically in Rome, while the rest is not a literal prediction of the future, but a vision for what it means to conquer as a follower of Christ through self-sacrificial Lamb power (p. 102). Stephen Cook objects that such historicist readings

are a way of "domesticating" the text, depriving it of its richness, alienness, and radicalness by pretending that it is simply about the past. Premillennialists and other futurists who see the text as exhausted by events yet to occur, likewise domesticate the text,

refusing to see that the apocalyptic texts of Scripture are equally about the present.

As a cure, Cook recommends what he calls a "premodern" reading of Scripture that "sees apocalyptic texts as symbolically rich, inspired literature that invigorates the imagination, offering readers new orientation and resolve about the life of faith" (p. 63). Premodern views accept what is alien

The consistent message of Scripture and especially the Book of Revelation, is that the only true power is "Lamb power," a lifestyle of vulnerability modeled on Christ.

(to our world) as reality, allowing that the transcendent can break into the mundane and ultimately will overturn it entirely. Revelation and other biblical apocalyptic texts are not simply about the past, nor simply about the future; they are about both the past and the present, and receive their ultimate fulfillment in the future as they are multiply realized through time (pp. 67-68).

While Cook's text is less readable and more academic than Rossing's stirring prose, it is carefully and competently argued and never stirs far from the apocalyptic literature he considers. Cook argues that apocalyptic texts have four significant theological contributions. First, in their vision of a cosmos-wide redemption, they counter the overly individualistic evangelical view of salvation. Second, they counter the liberal reduction of God's salvation to social programs by unblinkingly affirming that evil will persist until God radically overturns history. Third, they put readers in touch with transcendent reality as a backdrop to our current world. Finally, they offer us a deeper insight into the reality, nature, and threat of evil (p. 72 ff.). As the apocalyptic texts highlight, we live in a world that is finally so evil that its ultimate redemption can only be forced onto it by God.

PASSIONS AND POLICIES

In such a world of evil, our beliefs and scriptural interpretations matter, but perhaps even more important are the policies that they lead to. Such, at least, seems the best explanation for Rossing's passionate condemnation of dispensational premillennialism:

The dispensationalist version of the biblical storyline requires tribulation and war in the Middle East, not peace plans. That is the most terrifying aspect of this distorted theology. Such blessing of violence is the very reason why we cannot afford to give in to the dispensationalist version of the biblical storyline — because real people's lives are at stake. (p. 46)

The ethical vision of dispensationalism, according to Rossing, is one of unremitting violence toward non-Christians (at least during the tribulation), toward the earth that we get to blastoff from and escape, and even toward ourselves:

For [dispensationalists], the heart of God is, first of all, this heart of wrath and terror against the world — the wrath of the Lamb — not a heart of suffering love on behalf of the world. Indeed, what my students who grew up in dispensationalist or fundamentalist homes remember most powerfully from their childhoods is the fear and wrath of God and the Lamb. (p. 136)

Rossing offers no reason to believe that dispensationalism necessarily leads to any of this violence, and little to believe that it has; expecting violence in the Middle East is rather different from causing or glorifying in it. Indeed, she is so concerned to grasp every argument against dispensationalism that several of her charges seem contradictory. Dispensationalists,

she charges, are escapists, uncaring about the world and disastrously callous toward the environment because of their deterministic view of prophecy; seeing God as having settled the future in advance, they border on complacency. Immediately after issuing this complaint, she charges that this “can even encourage people to try to hasten the scripted apocalyptic events themselves, with deadly consequences for our world” (p. 93). It is difficult to see how such complacency and radicalism regarding earthly damage are meant to coexist in the dispensationalist ethic.

Certainly dispensational premillennialism might lead people to ignore the environment, but it equally might lead them to preserve all aspects of our world, since it is this very world (after a terrible tribulation) that Jesus will reign over during the millennium. Likewise, dispensational premillennialism may cause some to become complacent, but historically it was the prime engine for the missional movements of the twentieth century; as “The Countdown” urges, we do not know when Christ will return, and so we must call upon him while we may! It seems likely, then, that dispensational premillennialism is as liable to abuse as any other religious doctrine, but perhaps no more so.

The one point on which all of these authors agree is that apocalypticism, properly understood, should lead us to continue working in our current world while we wait for the final in-breaking of Christ. The biblical apocalyptic visions may seem utterly alien, but their effect should be immediate, Cook urges: “apocalyptic visions make sense of life and help compose and orient readers, but their impetus is outward, toward witness and involvement” (p. 77).

Ultimately, the debate among competing views of the end times, and especially the current backlash against the “left behind” theology of dispensationalists, is an interesting and important conversation. But this debate must not detract from apocalypticism’s practical implication: that we should live and work in this world filled with hope as we look forward and pray with John, “Amen. Come Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).



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Death, Resurrection, New Creation

BY DAN EPP-TIESSEN

Christian discipleship is the lifestyle that celebrates and embodies the new creation that burst into this world when God raised Jesus from the dead. Three recent books explore how the mission of the Church flows out of its future hope.

Eschatology – the study of biblical teachings on the end of time, the return of Christ, and the working out of God’s ultimate purpose for creation – is central to Christian faith. The three books reviewed here highlight its relationship to discipleship and the Church’s mission in the world.

N. T. Wright’s encyclopedic knowledge of the New Testament, engaging writing style, and ability to discern the contemporary relevance of biblical texts, make it a joy to read *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008, 332 pp., \$24.99). The two questions that guide the book – “What are we waiting for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime?” (p. xi) – illustrate how Wright links Christian convictions about the future and life after death with a vision for the Church.

Wright challenges popular misconceptions about heaven, the soul, and eternal life and the misinterpretation of biblical texts that underlies these misconceptions. Because “we have been buying our mental furniture for so long in Plato’s factory” (p. 153) where humans are dissected into body and soul, Christianity has been distorted into an otherworldly faith that envisions salvation in terms of disembodied souls experiencing a life of bliss in heaven. Such misconceptions undermine the mission of the Church by shifting the focus away from kingdom agenda such as feeding the hungry,

freeing the oppressed, and caring for God's good creation, in favor of saving individual souls.

According to Wright, God's resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proper starting point for all thinking about life after death. As part of God's final intervention to remake the world, an intervention that has begun already in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God will grant the faithful disciple a new immortal body. Resurrection of the body does not mean that God will somehow need to re-gather our molecules, but the resurrection of Christ constitutes God's promise that our present embodied lives will someday become even more real and solid as they are granted an incorruptible physicality. Resurrection is body- and earth-affirming because the actions we engage in now to build for God's kingdom will be taken into and fulfilled in God's new heaven and earth in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

Resurrection is the defining event of God's new creation, and so the early Christians believed that God would someday do for the cosmos what God had already done for Jesus Christ. Hence, Revelation 21-22 depicts a new heaven and new earth no longer subject to the forces of death and decay. Popular beliefs in a rapture are profoundly unbiblical. The New Testament does not envision Christians being whisked out of a world destined for destruction, but envisions God coming to dwell with God's people on a purified and renewed earth. Prior to resurrection at the last day the faithful dead are with Christ as the Apostle Paul says (Philippians 1:23), or in Paradise as Jesus assures the repentant criminal on the cross (Luke 23:43).

The mission of the Church flows out of its future hope. Because the New Testament is not primarily concerned with individual eternal destiny but with God's plans to rescue and re-create the whole world, the mission of the Church is to participate in the rescue of humanity and creation as we see this rescue and renewal initiated in the ministry of Jesus. "What you *do* in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself – *will last into God's future*" (p. 193). Christian discipleship is the lifestyle that celebrates and embodies the new creation that burst into this world when God raised Jesus from the dead.

Wright's book contains a wealth of material for sermons and the various chapters could provide grist for adult groups willing to engage in serious Bible study and theological reflection. I have only two minor critiques of the book. Much of the material has appeared in Wright's other books, but the repeated reminders of this fact become tiresome. Secondly, Wright is sometimes unnecessarily dismissive of theological perspectives with which he disagrees – for instance, when he writes "the worm has turned, theologically speaking, in the last twenty years" on the "liberal optimism in Western society," which has led to "the obvious failure of the equivalent liberal optimism in theology, driven as it was by the spirit of the age" (p. 178).



Donald G. Bloesch's *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 336 pp., \$20.00) provides a fitting conclusion to his seven-volume *Christian Foundations* series. The book's chapters follow categories of traditional theological reflection, treating such topics as angels and demons, the day of the Lord, the millennium, the resurrection of the dead, the interim state between death and final resurrection, the communion between saints alive and deceased, predestination, God's plan for the Jews, heaven and hell, and Christian hope.

The mandate of Christians is not to flee this world but to bring it into subjection to the advancing kingdom of Christ.

One of the great strengths of the book is that Bloesch begins discussion of each topic with attention to a variety of biblical texts. Then he draws on the insights of Christian thinkers from the Church Fathers to the present, including evangelical, mainline Prot-

estant, Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Orthodox. As a result the reader acquires understanding and respect for the breadth of Christian thinking on any particular topic as well as insight into how such diversity developed.

One chapter begins by discussing biblical texts that look forward to the arrival of God's earthly kingdom, the roots of all millennial thinking. This leads into helpful summaries of premillennialism, dispensationalism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, and symbolic interpretations of the millennium. Bloesch observes that one of the reasons for such diversity of opinions is that far too often Christians, especially Evangelicals, literalize and therefore misunderstand the figurative language of the Bible. Bloesch suggests that the millennium of Revelation 20 is "a symbol of the earth in a stage of transition from history to eternity. It is a symbol of the world in the process of being transfigured by the glory of God" (p. 111). Bloesch's understanding of the millennium is consistent with his overall realized and futurist eschatology. The millennium is God's kingdom which burst into history through the ministry of Jesus and continues to advance despite constant opposition from the principalities and powers, until it will be fulfilled at Christ's second coming. Hence, the mandate of Christians is not to flee this world but to bring it into subjection to the advancing kingdom of Christ.

Like Wright, Bloesch espouses a thoroughly body- and earth-affirming eschatology. When we die nothing significant about our lives will be lost. There will be no rapture that allows the faithful to escape this world while God trashes it. The parousia involves the earthly appearance of Christ on the day of the Lord when God will renew all of creation and grant the faithful renewed bodies.

Bloesch deliberately tackles issues – like the communion of saints, for example – generally generally neglected by evangelical theologians. Common faith and the atoning work of Christ create a mystic communion between Christians and the saints in paradise who point us to Christ. Bloesch even encourages prayers for the ongoing spiritual growth of these saints, and suggests that they minister to those left on earth.

Bloesch agrees with Wright that at death the faithful enter an interim stage in God's presence called Paradise, a place of superabundant life, although he claims that even this stage involves some type of embodied existence. The vast number of people who have not embraced Christ remain in an interim state, described in Scripture as sheol-hades or the nether world of spirits, awaiting final judgment at the return of Christ.

Despite the many strengths and insights of this book, it has one significant weakness. Bloesch frequently imports his own theology into biblical texts, thereby distorting their meaning. He perpetuates the common misconception that Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:14-15 describe the fall of evil angels prior to creation (p. 48), when these texts are actually part of taunt songs lampooning foreign kings (see Isaiah 14:4; Ezekiel 28:12). He claims that God's first victory over Satan's kingdom of darkness occurred already in Genesis 1:4 with the separation of light and darkness (p. 53). This interpretation distorts the thought world of Genesis 1 and the entire Old Testament, neither of which ever mention a kingdom of Satan. From an evangelical committed to the authority of Scripture one would hope for more careful use of Scripture.



The brilliant insights of Jürgen Moltmann make his *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, paperback edition 2004, 390 pp., \$.25.00) as relevant today as when the hardcover edition appeared in 1996. According to Moltmann, Christianity is entirely eschatological because God is by definition a God who is coming. The eschaton is God's coming and arrival, and because the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit already make this future proleptically present, or present through anticipation, God's coming kingdom creates new possibilities for faithful life in the present.

Like Wright and Bloesch, Moltmann blames Platonic dualism for undermining a robust understanding of the resurrection. Hope for resurrection empowers Christians for discipleship and resistance to evil powers because it is body- and earth-affirming, in contrast to a Gnostic denigration of the body and the physical world that is the logical consequence of a Platonic dualism that emphasises the immortal soul's destiny to escape the shackles of its earthly body. Because Christians live in fellowship with Christ their earthly lives are already interpenetrated and empowered by the eternal life

that flows from the resurrection of Christ. After death Christians are safe in Christ as they await the corporate resurrection at God's final coming when all death will be banished.

Moltmann is appreciative of biblical apocalyptic which he views as subversive literature intended to empower resistance to oppressive imperial forces. One of the most insightful sections of the book analyses how Constantinianism – the form of Christianity that developed when Roman Emperor Constantine (272-337) made it the official religion – domesticated the coming apocalyptic reign of God that shatters evil empires, and identified God's kingdom with the Roman Empire, and after the fall of Rome with the institutional Church. Because the Church abandoned its earlier hope for the coming of Christ's kingdom in history, its eschatology shrivelled into personal hope that the immortal soul would go to heaven or personal fear that it would face the wrath of God's judgment. "Without millenarian hope, the Christian ethic of resistance and the consistent discipleship of Christ lose their most powerful motivation," Moltmann claims. "Without the expectation of an alternative kingdom of Christ, the community of Christ loses its character as a 'contrast community' to society" (p. 201).

Because the coming God who redeems is the Creator, and because there is no human life detached from nature and a physical body, there is no redemption for humanity apart from redemption of nature and a change in the cosmic conditions of life. God's new heaven and new earth will involve radical transformation, but in such a way that nothing from the old creation will be lost, only brought back in new form.

Moltmann's book is full of deep insights profoundly relevant for the life of the Church, but it is not for the faint of heart. Discussions of the works of philosophers and theologians provide excellent background to Moltmann's own views, but pose a challenge for readers to understand. Like too many academic theologians, Moltmann writes in a style that will appeal mostly to specialists, and few ordinary readers will possess enough determination to wade through the dense prose and absorb the book's important insights.



On most topics there is an amazing coherence of opinion among the three authors, with the exception of the final judgment. Wright and Bloesch assert that despite the enormity of divine grace, God's abhorrence of evil and the horrendous suffering that humans inflict on each other demand that persons who reject the offer of salvation experience the consequences of their deliberate alienation from God. Bloesch claims that God's grace continues to operate beyond the grave and offers departed sinners opportunities for healing and repentance, but final judgment and hell are real. While hell will be a place of alienation from God's new creation, it will not be a place of retributive torture at the hands of a vindictive God. In the end only one

kingdom will remain standing, the kingdom of Christ, and therefore the suffering of hell will be curative and may even restore some sinners to salvation.

Moltmann notes that the Bible contains both passages suggesting a universal salvation and texts emphasizing judgment of the wicked, and so our convictions must be based on other than purely scriptural grounds. He argues that God's grace is more powerful than human sin and that as final judge, Jesus will judge in keeping with the same love for enemies he demonstrated in his earthy ministry. Because the ultimate purpose of the last judgment is to put things right and establish the redeeming reign of God, this judgment will be a joyous affair that condemns and annihilates all evil, but ultimately heals and liberates even the worst of sinners. Not only will the world's murderers and oppressors finally fail to triumph over their victims, but in eternity they cannot even remain the murderers of their victims (p. 255).



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